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A SMILE PLAYED WITH THE CORNERS OF CHINCAPIN'S MOUTH WHILE HE PERUSED THE NOTICE,
HELD UP BY MONTEZUMA'S STRONG ARMS.

Blade, the Sport;

OR,

The Giant of Clear Grit Camp.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "RANCH ROB'S WILD RIDE," "THE DENVER DETECTIVE," "DANDY DAVE OF SHASTA," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ENEMIES OF THE PAST.

IN the midst of a thunder-storm that swept the trails and passes of the San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado, a human figure appeared suddenly on the borders of the roughest of stage roads, and crouched, as if for protection from some enemy, under a ledge of rock.

The almost incessant crashes of thunder seemed to rend the inky sky overhead, and the forked lightning ever and anon revealed the man's surroundings.

"Velvet Foot is here—now let the yellow tiger come!"

These were the only words that dropped from the croucher's lips while he kept his position with his head turned in a listening attitude to the south, or toward the New Mexican border.

The uncouth stage-road beside which the man under the rock crouched, ran northward to the borders of the Gunnison country, while southward it extended to the confines of San'a Fe.

There were few men brave enough to drive the stage that lumbered over the road at uncertain intervals; and they were dark-faced fellows inured to dangers, and daring enough for any calling.

Not far from the croucher, but deep in the mountains was Clear Grit, an extensive mining-camp, where the stage always unloaded and where fresh horses were obtained. Then the driver would swear and crack his whip, and the team would start for Gunnison.

The man on the stage trail knew all this.

He was expecting the stage despite the storm. The croucher with the Indian face was not there to kill.

Where was the stage?

Several miles to the south four horses were toiling slowly up a rough incline with their heads bent to the tempest.

The man seated above them no longer plied the whip, nor added a driver's oaths to the harsh rattle of the thunder.

"We'll git thar if you give the hosses a chance," he said, apparently addressing some one on the inside of the stage that creaked over the mountain trail, threatening at times to topple over in spite of the efforts of the gallant horses. "I've seen storms before, but this is the boss 'un. When will we strike Cl'ar Grit? Some time afore day, if we keep on."

"Ther keep on, for heaven's sake!" answered a man from the interior of the vehicle. "Won't we strike the level soon?"

"Thar's no level to this trail; it's up an' down

all the time. Mebbe you've never struck the San Juan kentry afore."

The muttered reply that greeted this observation did not reach the driver's ears.

"I needn't tell you if I have," were the words.

"Yes, sir, I have seen the San Juan country before, and, if I am not mistaken, more than one man will know it before I'm many days here. Dan?"

There was no response.

"You ain't asleep, Dynamite?"

"No, I'm not asleep," said the deep voice of an uncultured man from one of the dark corners of the stage. "I've been wishing that we war at Cl'ar Grit. I don't like storms—I allus hated 'em. I never could see what they're good for."

A slight laugh greeted the last word, but it ended abruptly, for a flash of lightning that lit up the whole interior of the stage as well as the mountain road for a goodly distance, caused the two passengers to recoil from the windows with exclamations of terror.

"That's boss lightning, cap'n," said the man who had been called Dynamite. "This San Juan kentry beats the world in more ways than one. I'm glad you've come into it. You'll like it by an' by—when you git used to the boys an' their ways. But you've seen men catamounts afore, cap'n."

"Oh, yes," and a chuckle followed the last word.

Dynamite Dan leaned forward as if to catch the expression on his companion's face, but keen as his eyes were, he could not make out anything.

The interior of the stage was dark again, and the mountain rough fell back to his old position in the corner, not at all satisfied with his inspection.

"There! heavens! did you see that?" suddenly exclaimed Dynamite's comrade at his ear.

"See what, cap'n?"

"Something just crawled up on top of the stage."

"Ye'r dreamin', cap'n."

"No! I got but a glimpse of the thing, for its foot touched my hand. It wasn't the foot of a catamount, Dynamite, for I've felt that before now; but it felt like the soft moccasin of an Indian."

If the speaker could have seen Dynamite Dan's face at that moment he would have been confronted by an expression of disbelief.

The mountain rough had traveled the trail before, but an incident of the kind just mentioned by his companion he had never met with.

For a moment neither of the men spoke again.

If a human figure had made its way to the top of the stage, why had not the driver discovered it?

The horses were now drawing the vehicle over a comparatively fair road, but the vivid lightning continually revealed towering masses of jagged rocks, which at places threatened to descend upon the stage and crush it.

"Something's up there—I know it!" persisted Dynamite's companion, breaking the silence that reigned in the stage. "I certainly felt a foot."

"If you say so, cap'n, I'll look."

As there was no response, Dynamite Dan opened the door at the rear end of the vehicle, and almost instantly disappeared from his fellow travelers' gaze.

The next moment he caught the iron railing that ran around the top of the stage, and swung himself clear of the one step under the door.

"He'll find an Indian up there—I know it," ejaculated the man left in the vehicle. "It's the red skin who has stuck to the trail with the pertinacity of a blood-hound. He knew I was to travel the trail to-night. My God! I'll pension Dynamite for life if he pays my debts while he's up there."

The last word had scarcely left the speaker's lips when a wild oath grated on his ears, and something not unlike the body of a man shot past the window toward the road.

"Dynamite found him, as I knew he would!" he exclaimed, starting up, and drawing a revolver as he sprung to the door. "If the falling man was Dynamite," I'll settle with the red-skin myself. Things have got to reach a crisis some time—better now than after awhile perhaps."

He was on the outside of the vehicle, and his voice sounded like the hiss of a snake.

"I'm here, devil!" he exclaimed, as he dexterously drew his figure up to the roof of the stage. You have hunted Blade the Sport a long time. The trail ends here!"

At that moment a flash of lightning rent the sky, and he saw to his surprise that he was the only person on the stage.

"Ah! red coward, you would not stand and face Blade," he grated, raising his voice. "You stole to the stage roof like a sneaking mountain cat; you left it like a whipped wolf! I know you, Indian. I have come to the San Juan region for a purpose, which a thousand cowardly Velvet Foots cannot balk. I'm the same man who got the best of you when you were the coward of Sitting Bull's camp—the same person who robbed you of the only thing you ever loved—and that thing you stole. Devil, I am Blade! The knife I carried then I carry now, but I can use it better than I did the night we parted in the canyon."

To these mad words there was but one reply—a loud mad whoop that awoke the echoes of the mountains.

"I accept the challenge. Stand where you are—I'm coming down!" answered Blade. "Stop the stage, driver, till I pay forever a debt of hate and blood!"

But the stage lumbered on.

"Don't you hear me?" cried Blade, turning toward the driver's seat. "I won't keep you here five minutes for—Heavens! there's no man on the seat!"

This discovery, revealed by another lightning stroke, was certainly startling.

Blade, the Sport, was the only occupant of the stage-roof.

"Ho!" he called out sharply to the horses, as he flung himself forward and gathered up the lines, pulling back with all his strength, which was prodigious. "Just wait a minute, red coward! I'll be there!"

The foremost horses were dragged back upon their haunches, the hindmost ones forced against the stage, and the vehicle itself made to recoil.

"Now for the settlement!" hissed the man as he gave up the lines, and clambered over the edge of the roof from whence he leaped over the front wheel to the ground.

As he struck the trail, he turned to the south, for the stage had traveled some distance since his words of defiance hurled at his red foe.

A few bounds took him down the trail.

"Here I am!" he said, halting suddenly. "Velvet Foot, Blade, the man whom you have hunted like a bloodhound, is ready to end the trail. Come forth! We have fought before in the night. You sought me then; I seek you now. I have come to the San Juan region to win in a new game. Neither you nor the powers of perdition shall baffle me."

The only reply to this challenge was the grasping of Blade's arm by a hand that had the pressure of a vise.

"Velvet Foot—"

"No, it's me, cap'n—Dynamite," was the interruption. "I thought you war Blade, but I weren't sar'tin. I found the Injun upon the stage, but I left afore I had time to inspect him. You'll not git to fight him any more to-night, but ef you're sp'ilin' fur a scrimmage I kin accommodate ye."

Blade looked astonished.

"You?" he exclaimed. "We're not enemies, Dynamite."

"Thar's whar you miss it, Blade. Ten years ago I wasn't called Dynamite Dan. I got that name among the San Juan mines. Thar's war to the knife an' the knife to ther hilt between us. You shouldn't fight the Injun ef he'd come hyer fur that purpose. I'm yer man, Blade. You'll never git to open the game you came hyer to play. Now let us go to work. Ther hosses will stand. Ther man what lives kin take ther stage on to Cl'ar Grit. Ther driver is dead."

Dynamite Dan released Blade's arm and stepped back.

At that moment the forked fire revealed his position to Velvet Foot's foe.

Dynamite Dan stood five feet off ready for the duel—a fourteen-inch bowie in his right hand!

CHAPTER II.

A DEVIL'S THROW.

"I DON'T care a continental for the southern stage. I want to hear from the north."

In fact every denizen of Clear Grit Camp was anxious to hear from "the north."

The night whose storm witnessed the events narrated in the foregoing chapter was nearing its end, but not a man of Clear Grit had closed his eyes in slumber.

The miners' camp was situated more than twenty miles north of the spot we have just left. The rough stage road that wound like a serpent's path over the San Juan mountains ran through it on its way to Gunnison, a town of some importance on the Gunnison River.

The last mentioned place lay north of Clear Grit, and wild was the mountain scenery and

rough the many trails that stretched between the two towns.

The "north" referred to by the citizens of Clear Grit, whom we have just quoted, was what in other words was called the Gunnison country, although it might mean the weird Cochetopa Hills.

"None ov us cares about the stage," said another of the dark-shirted miners, who formed a ring about the camp-fire that burned in the center of the camp, where there was a roughly laid-out square. "It's time fur Montezuma an' his pards to come in. It all depends on the news the boys bring back. If it's gold, we'll leave Cl'ar Grit to the coyote an' the crow, an' break fur the new diggin's. Mebbe it's an Injun yarn—a red-skin decoy an' nothin' else."

"It's gold—hard rocks an' hard to git, Blizzard!" put in another, glancing at the last speaker, known throughout Clear Grit as Blizzard Bill. "I know the Cochetopa Hills, fur warn't I lost thar once? An' I never dreamed that I war wanderin' over miles on miles ov gold mines, but I war!"

"Thet's only opinion, Nugget; but we'll wait till the boys come in."

"They're comin' now."

Several men sprung up and listened for a moment, but soon sat down again, disgusted.

"It's the infernal Mexican stage!" they said. "We want news from the north—nothin' from Greaserdom!"

The men of Clear Grit had some days before sent several miners to the distant Cochetopa Hills for the purpose of sounding the truthfulness of the reports that gold existed in great quantities there.

The mines about the camp were, in western parlance, "playing out," and the citizens of Clear Grit were anxious to pull up stakes and leave for a more fruitful gold-producing region.

What, if coupled with the reports of treasure in the new country, was a story of a band of mysterious men, who guarded the mines? What if the story-teller had poured into the ears of the men of Clear Grit a thrilling narrative of hair-breadth escapes in that country?

The gold-hunters never thought of such things.

The Cochetopa Hills might swarm with Indians and hooded men, the latter supposed to be road-agents in new employment—if Montezuma and his friends, the investigating committee, reported gold among the hills, they would forthwith abandon Clear Grit—leave it to the coyote and the crow, as one has said—and invade the region of death and gold.

It was time for the spies to return.

But instead of them there came the sounds of a team approaching from the Mexican border.

It was the stage.

"I wish that stage an' its passengers war in the Styx!" grated one of the miners. "Hyer I've sat listenin' to the hosses, b'liefin' that it war Montezuma an' his pards. Thet route ou't to be bu'sted up fur foolin' us thet way. What does it amount to, anyhow? The only passengers it brings to Cl'ar Grit ar' a few New Mexicans an' Injuns—fellers what stay an hour, poke their noses 'round, never set 'em up, an' go

on to the Gunnison kentry, where they all git rich, an' go home another way."

"That's so, Chincapin. Let's tell old Zeb that he needn't go on to-night, nor in the mornin' either. While we're waitin' for Montezuma, we kin bu'st up thet stage-route, which never brought one payin' passenger to Cl'ar Grit."

The last speaker's proposition was received with a good deal of favor, and, as the heavy stage approached, giving forth clear notes of its progress in the clear night-air, the majority of the sitters round the camp-fire got up, eager to break up the route.

"What does Zeb mean? He's comin' this way, as if he had no passengers to unload at the old stoppin'-place," suddenly said one of the roughs. "Look yonder! Thet's not the old feller on the seat."

The horses, and the vehicle which they drew, with the driver, had arrived in the light of the fire, which threw a ruddy glare far and wide.

Perched on the seat raised to the top of the stage was a man whose appearance claimed the attention of every one.

He was strikingly arrayed in the first place, in a loose Mexican jacket, embroidered with wide silver braid; and his leggings, loose but not baggy, opened at the lower extremity, where there were several gilt buttons. He wore a wide-rimmed sombrero, which was upturned in front, displaying a handsome face, ornamented by a pair of glittering black eyes, a wavy mustache, dark as a raven's wing, and framed in a sea of black hair that fell over his shoulders.

By this time, the man on the seat had guided the horses alongside of the fire, and was gazing down upon the rough crowd with as much curiosity as was being bestowed upon him.

"Is this Clear Grit?" he asked, in a half-satisfied tone.

"That's what it war at sundown," was the quick retort; "but it's not likely to be Cl'ar Grit forever. Whar's Zeb, stranger?"

Instead of replying to this question concerning the old driver, the man in the sombrero began to come down from his perch.

"I am driver and passenger all in one," he said, as he smiled. "I came near being left behind; but it fell to the other man's lot to stay."

He spoke the last words so significantly that the men of Clear Grit exchanged glances.

"I don't know where the old driver is," he said, replying to twenty eyes at the same time. "I didn't have time to go back to look for him. You haven't such a thing as a surgeon in camp, have you?"

"Yes," said Chincapin, stepping forward. "I guess I'm the only chap what knows the difference between a lesion an' a bruise! I'm Chincapin. Ar' you hurt?"

The new-comer eyed Chincapin closely for a moment.

The self-styled surgeon was slightly above the medium height, well built, gray-eyed and quite intelligent looking, although he used the vernacular of the mines. He might have passed his twenty-third year, and it was possible for him to be nineteen, so young he looked.

The stranger's scanning with his piercing eyes seemed to end in Chincapin's favor.

"I am hurt, how badly I don't know, for I

can't see," he said, smiling faintly. "I got into a fracas coming over the trail. I think the driver lost his life." The sentence was addressed to the crowd in general. "Where will you examine my wound at, Dr. Chincapin?"

"At my office," answered the youth, grinning as he glanced at his companions, who noted his humorous emphasis of the last word. "Come with me. You kin leave the stage an' the hosses. The boys 'll take care ov them."

As Chincapin turned away, he was followed by the dark-featured Apollo, who walked unsteadily, but with his coal-black eyes fixed on the young doctor.

Chincapin and his follower did not exchange a word during the journey to the former's cabin, which stood a few rods from the square illuminated by the camp-fire.

The young miner-doctor ushered his patient into a dark room which he soon relieved by a light.

"This is my office, though I don't have many jobs," smiled Chincapin.

Without more ado, the stranger doffed his embroidered jacket, and Chincapin saw dark stains on the gray shirt thus exposed and right behind the right shoulder.

"A knife wound. Ah! I see!" exclaimed the young doctor as he began to expose the shoulder.

The wearer of the sombrero ground his teeth, and braced himself; then he said:

"Don't handle me as though I was a child, Chincapin. I'm a man who has been thar before. I wouldn't be Blade, the Sport, if I flinched here."

Why did Chincapin start back with an illy suppressed cry and stare at the speaker as if a ghost had risen at his feet?

What magic was there in the name of Blade, the Sport?

"Why don't you go on?" asked the handsome patient impatiently. "I want to get out of Clear Grit as soon as possible."

With the last word he wheeled upon Chincapin who recoiled as their eyes met.

"Are you Blade, the Sport?" the young surgeon asked in a tone that betrayed his great excitement.

"I'm nobody else; but who are you and why do you nail your eyes to me? You have called yourself Chincapin, but—"

"I'm only Chincapin, but I have a right to take your life!"

"You?"

"Yes—I!"

"Another man tried that since sundown, but I got his. You may have heard of Dynamite Dan."

Chincapin uttered a startling cry.

"He was my friend!"

"And my foe!"

"I will avenge his death! I always felt that we would meet some day."

Chincapin sprung forward, all the lion in his nature glaring from his flashing eyes.

"This for Dynamite's blood!" he shouted with uplifted bowie. "I dress your wound forever by inflicting one more deadly!"

The next instant the two men came together. Chincapin's vengeance-guided arm was met by

the sport's right hand, and effectually checked in mid-air.

"I don't want your blood, Chincapin—you're nothing to me!" said Blade, the Sport, calmly, as he held the frenzied youth away. "But I will admonish you that I'm not to be trifled with."

An instant later the astonished Chincapin was flung across his cabin by a strength that seemed to belong to a giant.

He struck the wall, and threw one hand up for support.

At that moment Blade made a move that dazed him; something hissed through the air across space that separated them, and a hundred needles seemed to pierce his palm.

With a cry of pain the miner-surgeon looked at his hand.

It had been pinned to the logs by a twelve-inch bowie!

"Good-night, Doctor Chincapin," said Blade, the Sport. "I'll get my wounds dressed elsewhere. You're young, but don't be a fool. Don't follow me crying for blood. I've had all of yours that I want."

Chincapin heard the man through. Then his feet seemed to slide from under him!

CHAPTER III.

MONTEZUMA'S REPORT.

"CONFFOUND it! I had to admonish the youngster that I must not be trifled with," said Blade, the Sport, in audible tones, as he stepped from the cabin, leaving the swooning Chincapin to his fate.

He looked over his shoulder as he finished, as if a sound had startled him, but he saw no one.

He was more than a rod from the miner's cabin, and through the still open door he saw a light burning on the rough deal table.

If he had looked sharper he might have caught sight of poor Chincapin.

"The boy's out of the way for the present, and Dynamite Dan forever, I think," he resumed, starting forward again. "The stroke I gave him after he cut me ended the fight, for he reeled away and fell headlong over the cliff at the edge of the stage trail where we fought. Heavens! to think that I rode twenty miles with a man who has wanted my life these ten years. I never dreamed that Dynamite was Dan Thunderbolt, the man whom I outwitted when I beat the Indian—the red-devil that climbed up on the stage."

He carried himself like a conqueror, his step firm, and his eyes shone like diamonds.

From Chincapin's cabin he walked straight to the square where he had left the stage and its team a few minutes before.

The men of Clear Grit had carried their threats into execution; they had commenced to break up the stage route, for the horses had been unharnessed and taken away, and the flames of the camp-fire were fast devouring the vehicle.

An oath fell from Blade's lips when he saw this.

His hopes of getting from Clear Grit that night by stage had to be abandoned; he would have to seek another method of exit from the camp.

It was more than idle curiosity that impelled him toward the crowd that surrounded a grizzly bearded giant, who was mounted on a whisky barrel in the center of the square.

The committee, or one of them at least, had returned from the Cochetopa Hills, and was making his report.

Blade, the Sport, advanced until he stood within earshot of the coarse voice of the man on the barrel.

"Gold! why the whole kentry's full ov it!" said the giant. "We warn't thar three hours afore Jim picked up a nugget that war almost the c'lar stuff. An' sech places fur minin'! ravines, water, everything handy. Thar ain't a single drawback, in my estimation, pards—not one!"

Did a faint smile appear at the corners of Blade's mouth?

"How kin that be, Montezuma?" asked a man in the crowd. "You say thar ain't any drawbacks up yonder, an' yet you left the other boys thar—hunted down an' wiped out by a gang ov men who are not Injuns. An' thar is no drawbacks?"

Montezuma, the giant, let a defiant laugh part his lips before he answered.

"That man's more than a devil!" murmured Blade, fixing his eyes on the Hercules on the barrel. "I would rather that the boys had finished him and let the rest of the committee come back with a report. What region produced that fellow? Montezuma, they call him. I never heard of him before."

It was true.

Blade, the Sport, now saw and heard of Montezuma for the first time!

He seemed to realize that he gazed upon one who was destined to give him as much trouble as all the rest of his enemies put together.

It is not strange, therefore, that while he glared at the giant his right hand should glide toward the deadly weapons in his belt.

The laugh that shook the gray hairs of the giant's drooping mustache was more the laugh of a fiend than that of a man.

"The boys ar' back thar--thet's a fact," he said, after it had ended and he had turned upon the man who had spoken from the crowd. "They died with their boots on, as men should die. Thar may be drawbacks to minin' in the Cochetopa kentry to some men, but thar's none to Montezuma. Ef it warn't fur comin' back ter report, by Jove, I would have stayed. I'm goin' back ef I hev to go alone, an' play a lone han'l with the men who claim the region!"

A loud shout, not from one throat, but from many, went up from the crowd.

It tol'l Blade the Sport that Montezuma would not go back alone; he would have at his back a band of men as fearless and as desperate as himself.

"We're all goin' back with you, Montezuma!" cried the spokesman of the crowd. "We'll leave Cl'ar Grit to the coyote an' the wolf. If thar ar'a thousand masked devils in the gold kentry, we'll go an' win it. Boys, all ov ye what vote to go to the Cochetopa Hills, hold up yer right hands!"

It is needless to say that every bronzed right hand instantly went up.

"That means an invasion of my territory by fifty men who cannot be scared off," said Blade. "They will have to be killed. The boys should know of the intended raid. If they think they have seen Montezuma for the last time, they are destined to wake up some morning and find themselves terribly mistaken."

He stood in his tracks a while longer.

He saw the men of Clear Grit throw their hats into the air at Montezuma's suggestion, and heard them give three cheers for the new land of riches.

Clear Grit was to be abandoned the following day, and Montezuma was to lead the band to the new mines!

All knew that the gold that lay buried in the depths of the Cochetopa Hills, and along the water-courses, was not to be obtained merely for the digging.

Each nugget might cost the blood, if not the life, of a human being—but what of that?

The miners of Clear Grit were men who had risked life for gold and silver before; they were ready, eager to do it again.

"To the Cochetopa Hills!" was the cry.

The guardians of the mines there should be driven from the treasure, and the men of Clear Grit would win the new Eldorado at the bowie's point and the revolver's muzzle!

"Hold! What will we do with the last passenger?" suddenly asked a rough fellow, just as Blade was in the act of turning away. "He can't go on in the stage."

"Leave 'im behind, er give 'im a hoss an' let 'im go on," was one of the replies. "He's nobody's fool, if I read his eyes kerrectly. Mebbe he'll die on Chincapin's hands."

"Who came in ther stage?" asked Montezuma.

"A Southern dandy, Monte—a chap with a sombrero, long hair, an' eyes that said 'shoot! shoot!' fifty times in a minute."

The giant uttered an exclamation that almost made Blade recoil.

"Where is that man?" he cried. "I want to see 'im. Is he still in Cla'r Grit?"

"He's at Chincapin's."

"War he hurt?"

"Cut somewhar."

"By whom?"

"We don't know thet."

"What did he call himself?"

"Blade."

"Great God, boys! He's the man we want to catch hyer."

"But you will not catch him."

The last sentence fell in determined tones from Blade's lips.

He saw the giant dash through the crowd while his last exclamation still quivered his bearded lips, and filled his eyes with flashes of fire.

"They will find Chincapin, but they shall not find me—not here at any rate!" the sport continued. "They have chosen their battle-ground. I will meet them on it. The blood of every man yonder shall water the soil of the Cochetopa country. By Jove! it was a lucky moment when I decided to return to the boys by way of Clear Grit."

Blade the Sport withdrew from the spot from

whence he had witnessed the scenes just described.

Montezuma, followed by one-half of his audience, had already disappeared.

He would soon reach Chincapin's cabin—a few eager bounds would take him beyond the threshold.

What was to be done must be accomplished quickly.

The sport turned toward the north.

Was he going to leave Clear Grit on foot?

Fate or intuition, no difference which, brought him soon to the rude stables where the relay of stage-horses had been kept since the establishment of the route.

"A fool for luck!" exclaimed Blade. "I might have spent an hour hunting for a horse. Ah! I will beat all you devils to the Hills, and when you reach them, you'll find your equals ready for the tussle."

Although the rough, strong doors were shut, there were no locks for Blade the Sport to pick.

He did not select a horse, but took the first one his hand touched, and led him forth.

In a short time the light of another day would again beautify the San Juan valley.

Triumph flashed up in Blade's eyes as he threw himself upon the back of the fresh horse which he had already clothed with bridle and bit.

Spurs he had none, saddle he did not wait to secure.

"Now for the death tussle in the Cochetopa lands!" fell from his tongue as he urged the horse from the spot.

A laugh so near that he turned his head was the sole reply.

"That infernal Indian!" hissed Blade. "He would not meet me when I dared him to the tussle on the stage road. By heavens! I'll stop and face him here in spite of Montezuma and his pards who have found Chincapin by this time."

He reined in his horse so suddenly that the animal was forced back upon his haunches, snorting with rage.

"Velvet Foot no fight here!" said a voice from the gloom that surrounded the uncouth stables. "He will be with Blade in the gold country; but he will not enter it with the yellow rock hunters of Clear Grit. Velvet Foot will follow his enemy to the end of the trail where blood will make the grass red. Does Blade wonder how Velvet Foot followed him so rapidly? Ah! he does not know that while he drove the horses Velvet Foot rode in the white man's stage."

An exclamation of mingled rage and astonishment was Blade the Sport's retort.

"Gods! if I had known that, your trail would have ended before this!" he grated. "You dare not end it here. Coward! red dog! you dare not face Blade where he is willing to meet you!"

"Velvet Foot has spoken. Him no fight here. The men of Clear Grit want Blade the Sport. Velvet Foot will not strike here!"

The voice ceased, but other sounds struck the sport's ears.

A crowd of male, revengeful spirits was surging toward the stables.

"I will go in order to meet you among the Cochetopa Hills!" flashed the sport. "You

don't wan't my life any more than I want yours. The beauty I robbed you of still lives, Velvet Foot. She's no girl now—no little child—and her home isn't a smoky wigwam; but she's a woman—the fairest flower in this wide America—and Blade's devoted wife!"

A howl of anger parted the lips of the unseen red-skin.

"Blade the Sport can't force Velvet Foot into a fight now," was the reply. "He holds back his hand until he is ready to strike."

"You'll strike too late!"

"Blade see. The oath of the red-man is in the hands of the Great Spirit."

"Come to the Gold Hills and try it!" exclaimed the sport, giving his horse voice and rein. "Come, coward, if you dare!"

"Velvet Foot will come," was the reply.

CHAPTER IV.

CLEAR GRIT'S DOOM.

MONTEZUMA and his comrades had found Chincapin bleeding and senseless in the little cabin where Blade the Sport's knife had pierced his hand, pinning it to the rough logs.

Several stayed to revive the youth. The rest, with border oaths and threats of vengeance, bounded away.

But they reached the stables too late. The man they wanted was gone.

If Velvet Foot, the Indian, saw them, he did not show himself. The exhibition might have worked him injury.

"Thar's no use follerin' him ef he took a hoss," said Montezuma. "I wish I had known that he war so near. I wouldn't hav made my report until we hed made a sieve ov him. Who is Blade the Sport? Who but the boss ov the devils what guard the gold mines ov the Cochetopa Hills?"

"Ah! if we had known that!" ejaculated one of the listeners, regretfully. "I never thought him more than a half-breed dandy on his way to Gunnison. He didn't hav to come this way to get to the Hills."

"Ov course not."

"He wanted to see if we hed heard ov the new gold kentry."

"Thet's it—that's what fetched 'im to Cl'ar Grit! But he didn't hav to go an' save Chincapin the way he bez. He might hav let the boy alone. Thar isn't a man hyer who wouldn't die fur the youngster."

"Not a man, Montezuma."

"Dynamite his pard ain't hyer—he hezn't got back from the South, but we'll stand by the boy an' make Blade pay for every drcp ov blood he shed to-night, just ez ef Dynamite war hyar."

"We're fur Chincapin ag'in ther world!"

More than one man spoke the last sentence; it fell from the lips of every one who had listened to the bronze giant Montezuma.

A moment's silence followed.

"The men up yonder will hear all from their cap'n," said the Hercules, pointing northward, toward the far-away Cochetopa Hills. "When we git thar, we'll find them prepared, but what ov that. They'll find us ready! I'm eager to pull up stakes and leave Cl'ar Grit. What's the use ov stayin' hyer another minute? Ef

Chincapin ain't able to travel he kin stay behind an' wait till Dynamite comes. By Jove! I wish we hed the old fellar with us now. W'd make things hum up yonder, with his revolver among ther rest. I'm off fur the Hills afore the sun creeps over the peaks."

A wild cheer which told the speaker that every man who heard was with him was the reply, and the crowd drew back from the stables.

By common consent the steps of all were bent toward the cabin where Chincapin, having recovered from his faint, was relating to a few his encounter with Blade while his hand was dressed.

The sport's bowie had inflicted a terrible gash, but the wound had been closed by several stitches, and lint and bandages applied.

The youth smiled grimly when the roughs headed by Montezuma, appeared at the door, each one with a solicitous countenance, and revenge lurking tiger-like in their eyes.

"A hand, not a heart, boys," he said. "The next time I play doctor I'll know something about my patients."

"What turned 'im on ye?" asked Montezuma.

"I attacked him first."

"You?"

"Yes, I suddenly discovered that he was the man who robbed Dynamite and the Indian years ago."

The listeners exchanged looks of astonishment.

"Robbed 'em ov what, Chincapin?"

Instead of replying, Chincapin's face lost color and he started like a person caught in the act of revealing a secret.

"Thar! you needn't give anybody away ef you don't want to," said Montezuma, kindly. "We don't care fer you to go on if you hev to let out a secret ov some kind. We don't care a continental what Blade, the Sport, stole from Dynamite an' a red-skin years ago. We know that he's chief ov the gang thet rule in the gold kentry, an' thet he drew some ov yer blood, an' thet's all we want ter know. Kin yer travel, Chincapin?"

The youth's eyes seemed to dance with eagerness.

"My hand is the only injured member I have, an' it's the left hand at that, thank fortune. He left me the right one that I might settle with him one of these days."

"In the Cochetopa kentry?"

"I care not where."

"Wal, we're goin' to say good-by to Cl'ar Grit, an' thet right away," said Montezuma. "We'd hev ye with us, Chincapin, but we thought you'd want to wait fer Dynamite, who'll be comin' back soon."

"Thar is no Dynamite any more," said one of the men who had remained with the young surgeon after the finding.

"No Dynamite?" echoed Montezuma. "Come, Colossus, we want no chaff."

"Ask the b'y."

The Colorado giant turned to Chincapin, but did not speak.

His glance was a question.

"The cut below Blade, the Sport's, shoulder is Dynamite's legacy," Chincapin answered.

"They met somewhar along the stage road, an' after the tussle the man who won drove on to Cl'ar Grit."

"Killed Dynamite, eh?" grated the giant. "He said so, ov course, but he lied! I wouldn't b'lieve a thousand Blades ef each one swore he wiped Dan out. I tell ye, Chincapin, Dynamite ain't ter die in ther presence ov such a dog!"

"He surely fought some one."

"I don't dispute that, fur ther cut proves it. But he didn't kill Dynamite."

"I wish I could think so."

"You will, by and by. Now, what will you do—go with us, or stay an' wait for Dynamite?"

"I will go," answered Chincapin, telling all by his decision that Montezuma's words had not raised his hopes.

"Then we're off. We'll leave the place whar ther shanties stand so hot fer ther wolves thet they'll burn the'r feet ef they come sneakin' 'round. Come, boys. We kin pack up an' git ready afore sun-up!"

Led by the giant, in whom they put implicit faith, the men of Clear Grit turned from the cabin.

Chincapin stood alone like a man in a trance.

He glanced at his bandaged hand, and felt with a quiver the sharp pain that darted through every nerve. His eyes flashed madly as he looked.

"I am going away from Clear Grit," he said, unconsciously speaking aloud as if he had a listener. "I have been happy here, for Dynamite has made life enjoyable. But I am going to tread the path of vengeance—to lift my hand against the man that has taken his life. I don't care a snap for my wound. It only serves to intensify my hatred. I must step into Dynamite's life trail. I must hunt for Floss—the only being Dynamite ever wholly fixed his heart on. What if she once occupied a smoky wigwam? It was because Dynamite had no house for her. What has become of the Indian, Velvet Foot, heaven knows! He has left Blade's trail long ago. Maybe the sport hurled him aside with one of his knives. Time will tell. Good-by, Clear Grit. Dynamite will come no more, and I may see you for the last time when the sun rises. I spurn Blade's warnin'. I am willin' for him to make it heart not hand, next time, if he can!"

The youth stood in the door of his cabin while he uttered the last words.

Daylight was breaking once more over the miners' town.

The camp-fire in the square was smoldering, and the last remains of the cumbersome stage were blackened sticks.

Chincapin knew that the miners were nearly ready to leave Clear Grit in a body for the Cochetopa Hills—that unknown land of gold and death.

They had few goods to pack, and these consisted principally of mining tools, which could be transported on the backs of horses; the miners themselves had few effects of their own.

"Hurry up, Chincapin," called out a voice. "We're about ready to vamose the ranch."

The youth stepped back into the cabin and armed himself.

A sigh escaped his lips as he stepped across the threshold of the old cabin, and turned his back upon it, then laughing lightly at this display of feeling, he sprung away and joined a number of men who were loading the horses.

He was greeted pleasantly, for the youth was a great favorite of the camp, but all noticed the serious expression which had again settled over his face.

"We're ready now, Chincapin," said a voice at his side, and a lighted stick fell at his feet. "Who war the pard you once told me about that burned all his ships so that his men couldn't turn back from the enemy's kentry?"

Chincapin did not reply, but stared into the bronzed face of the speaker, who was Montezuma.

"We're goin' to make Cl'ar Grit too hot to hold ther prowlin' coyotes when they come," continued the giant. "Look yonder! That's my cabin. I gave it ther blaze myself. Ther other boys ar' doin' ther same to their shanties."

Chincapin turned from Montezuma and saw volumes of dark smoke ascending skyward from the roofs of various cabins.

Clear Grit was being consumed!

The miners were determined to occupy the new gold country. There was to be no turning back.

"We mean bizness!" grated Montezuma. "I left a notice fur Dynamite when he comes, Chincapin. He'll know whar to come when he gits it. We'll not stay to see ther old camp go. We've all been happy hyar off an' on. We'll build a new Cl'ar Grit in the new mines, an' ef Blade, the Sport, keeps his word, some ov us will plaster up the chinks in the shanties ther with our blood. But we're goin' all the same. Thar's a thousand bonanzas among ther Cochetopa Hills!"

The giant ceased and watched the curling smoke and swirling flames with eyes aglow with demoniac joy.

CHAPTER V.

A VENGEANCE HUNTER'S OATH.

THE sun came up and found Clear Grit in flames.

Roof after roof fell in, the heavy logs gave way, and showers of sparks flew heavenward, adding a thrilling grandeur to a scene which had not a single human being for a spectator.

The miners led by a giant in stature and courage, had turned their backs upon the burning camp. They were traversing a trail which had lately been traveled by a man who rode a saddleless steed, which he constantly urged forward with shouts, blows, and the point of a bowie.

The smoke of the burning camp rose far above the mountains that hemmed it in.

If Blade, the Sport had glanced over his shoulder as the sun came up, he might have seen the dark cloud forming in the sky, and guessed its creation.

At last a man approached it, coming from the south.

He was alone and on foot, and as he neared Clear Grit, an expression of doubt and rage

strangely commingled, formed on his swarthy countenance.

If he was armed he showed no weapons. Probably he had lost them in some combat.

"It beats my time all holler," he exclaimed, halting and leaning against a tree just beyond the line of heat, where he folded his arms and gazed at the burning camp. "I'll bet my chances for paradise that he had suthin' to do with this deviltry. Gods! what a fool I war last night, but I didn't know what I held in my hands all ther time. I hed a thousand chances at his throat an' I didn't know that he war Blade, the Sport. Why didn't I know him? Because I saw him but once nigh ten years ago. an' then arter dark in a canyon. I might hav suspicioned suthin' when he told me that an Injun hed got up on the top ov the stage, for thar's livin' a red-skin what would hunt him to the Styx an' back ag'in. Like a fool, I went up to find that Injun an' got pitched off fur my pains. It couldn't hav been Velvet Foot arter all, fur he wouldn't hav served me that way."

It is true that the man communing thus in an audible tone with himself while he leaned against the tree was Dynamite Dan, the one man missing from Clear Grit Camp when it was fired and abandoned.

He had miraculously escaped from Blade the night before, and as soon as possible had made his way to Clear Grit to gaze upon a scene which naturally startled him.

"Whar ar' the boys?—that's what puzzles me!" he exclaimed. "Thar's been no scrimmage ov any kind that I kin see, but mebbe I haven't gone far enough."

He moved forward and went down the heated thoroughfare, with burning cabins on his right and on his left.

"Thar's been no fight—that's sartain!" he exclaimed, halting at the northern confines of the camp. "Sunthin's took the hull crowd away, but I thought Chincapin would have stayed. Mebbe," and Dynamite Dan seemed to hold his breath over the thought that was about to find expression on his lips, "Mebbe they heard the reports about gold in the Cochetopa region; but they wouldn't burn the camp if they hed, would they? Can't you get at the mystery, Dynamite?"

Dynamite Dan was nonplused, mystified.

He had at first laid the doom of Clear Grit at Blade's door—now he knew not where to put it.

"Hello! what's that?" he suddenly exclaimed, and, with the last word still on his lips, he darted toward an object which at that moment had claimed his attention.

About twenty paces from where he had halted, was a large tree whose main fork was about ten feet from the ground.

In this fork lay a boulder almost as large as a man's head, but a white object as large as his hand fluttered from beneath it.

A minute sufficed to put the fluttering object, which turned out to be a piece of paper, in Dynamite's hands.

"This ar' none ov Chincapin's work," he said. "He wouldn't do such a clumsy job. Hello! they're gone!"

In a moment Dynamite had mastered the

rough scrawl on the paper, with the ease that one reads a familiar chirography.

This was the message:

"We're off fur Cochetopa—all ov us. Yer man—not Chincapin, but the other 'un—hez gone ahead to git ready fur us. The hull kentry up thar is a gold mine. We left just afore sun-up. Foller, if you git this." **MONTEZUMA.**"

The signature was not needed to tell Dynamite the name of the writer—that was written in every line.

"It's ez cl'ar ez day now," he said, looking up. "They never intend to come back to Cl'ar Grit. Thet's why they left the torch behind. They're goin' to win the new gold hills or die. Some men ar' fools, an' ef I didn't know every one ov them, I might apply that word to 'em; but I can't."

"I'll be thar, Montezuma, fer Blade claims them hills. Whar he is, thar runs Dynamite's trail. Started afore sun-up, eh? Then they've got a good start ov me; but I'll hev a hand in the big tussle when it comes off!"

Dynamite Dan, as he finished, put the rudely-scrambled letter away beneath his buckskin jacket, and looked toward the far-away Cochetopa Hills.

"I renew my oath, Blade the Sport among the smokin' ruins of Cl'ar Grit!" he suddenly exclaimed. "I swear to foller you to the end of the trail I struck ten years ago. You have escaped my vengeance. To hundreds of men—to Chincapin even—I have been Dynamite Dan; but to you I am Dan Dumbold, the avenger of a blighted home among the Nebraska hills."

"You stole the child, but I got her from you. She could not, and would not, tell me where that home was. I took Floss to my old hut, but it wasn't home. Then I gave her to Velvet Foot, who promised to keep her for me. Ha! you came again, and robbed us both—Velvet Foot and me!"

"Hear me, Heaven! Here I again devote my life to the work of vengeance—here I swear to hunt Blade to the bitter end! I am oath-bound to Floss. She is not his wife; he lied when he told me this last night. I go to the Cochetopa Hills. I will find him—I will tear Floss from his power. A tiger named Dynamite Dan is on your trail!"

Having thus delivered himself, with his right arm raised toward heaven, the man among the ruins of the camp stepped back and prepared to depart.

Dynamite Dan was at their heels.

But he was oath-bound.

CHAPTER VI.

ANOTHER ENCOUNTER.

If the Cochetopa country was one vast gold-mine as Montezuma had reported it, it was the lair of the wolf and the home of the bear as well.

It contained deep canyons, dark trails, roaring rivers—in short, it was a great domain in which everything was wild, its scenery and its inhabitants.

An old miner, in prospecting, would have been struck by the character of the lofty hills and the looks of the seemingly bottomless gul-

lies. Everything said "gold! gold!" in a language not to be mistaken.

Why, then, had the country not been explored before?

There were mines in the San Juan region, mines in the wonderful Gunnison country, and the voice of the gold-hunter was heard on the northern borders of Colorado.

Ah! the Cochetopa Hills had been discovered even before the fearless Montezuma and his companions entered the wild domain, the most of them to die there with their boots on in a series of desperate conflicts, with which we have not to deal.

Deep in a darkened pass among the hills shortly after sunset three men leaned against several huge boulders, which had apparently dropped at some day from the threatening cliffs overhead.

They were stalwart fellows, with swarthy skins, and eyes that proclaimed them veritable mountain desperadoes.

"Somebody's comin'," said one, as he leaned forward for the purpose of listening down the pass.

"It's either the cap'n, or a grizzly—the cap'n, I hope," was the response from one of his companions. "Hadn't we better put on the hoods? The devil called Montezuma may not hev left the kentry."

"Pshaw! he made himself scarce arter we settled with his pards. If the cap'n's comin', we don't want the hoods on; but if it's another white man—"

"Heavens! Look yonder!"

All three of the men started back, for the slender figure of a young girl had appeared in the path a few feet ahead.

"It's Floss, walkin' in her sleep ag'in. 'Sh! she's not to be wakened. Hug the stones, boys, for she's comin' this way."

The figure, which had stopped for a moment, advanced again, and the three stalwarts hugged the rocks while they stared on the beautiful somnambulist, for such the young creature was.

The girl advanced slowly, of course, entirely unconscious of the men's presence.

She was very lovely and not more than seventeen. Her eyes were opened wide, but were expressionless, and her rich hair, uncombed, and beautiful in its wild abandon, fell over her shoulders and reached to her slender waist.

"That's ther ghost I saw ther other night," said one of the men in a whisper when the sleep-walker had passed them. "She war standin' on the very edge ov Gold Cliff, betwixt me an' ther moon; but I didn't look for more nor a minute. I never thought ov Floss; but seein' 's believin', boys."

"Ov course, Mardo. I don't know what the cap'n 'd say if he saw her walkin' in her sleep this way."

"Doesn't he know it?"

"I think not."

The somnambulist was still visible, but her figure was fast disappearing; the eyes of the trio were still following her intently.

"Whar will she bring up at?" asked Mardo.

"In bed ov course."

"She's not goin' that way now!"

"No, but she'll git thar; let her go. If we fol-

lowed her, we'd wake her up, an' frighten her to death."

Mardo was eager to see the end of the adventure that had astonished him.

"I've heard ov sleep-tramps afore, but that girl's my first," he said. "Pshaw! to think that I ran away when I saw her standin' on the p'int ov Gold Cliff—ran from a gal like that. Whar did the chief git her, Domino?"

Domino Dave as the man addressed was called among his companions—the hooded guardians of the Cochetopa mines—glanced at his other comrade before he replied.

"Whar did the cap'n git her, eh?" he said, turning to Mardo. "Thet's a question that's mighty hard to answer, but I reckon it's none ov our bizness. Fer my part, I'm willin' to do my duty an' ask no questions."

"Mebbe it's none ov my bizness, either, but I don't take back the question," growled Mardo, whose eyes flashed threateningly as the words rippled over his lips shaking the long hairs of the mustache that covered his mouth even when he spoke. "She's purtier nor a pictur—Floss is; an' many's the time I've stood an' watched her when she didn't see me an' pitied her ef she is the cap'n's gal."

"You never talked to her?"

"I never got a chance to do that."

"I wouldn't hunt one ef I war you."

"See hyer, boys," and Mardo's great bronzed hand fell on Domino's arm, as he looked him squarely in the face with the angry glare of a tormented tiger. "I'm one ov Blade's gold guards, like the rest ov ye, but when I enlisted under his leadership, I didn't toss all my manhood to the mountain winds. I don't b'lieve that the cap'n's got ther best right to Floss, an' I say it open an' above-board. Ef he war hyar, I'd say it since you've said what you hev. You know whar Blad'e got her, but I will find out!"

"What's got into you, Mardo?" exclaimed Domino. "Wha 't's yonder gal to you?"

"Nothin'."

"Then let well enough alone."

Mardo gazed over the trail on which Floss, the beautiful somnambulist had vanished, but said nothing.

He was not satisfied.

Something about the girl—her beauty or shapely figure—had captivated him or enlisted his attention. His companions saw, despite the hour, the eagerness that seemed to be consuming his deep black eyes.

All at once he darted forward as if controlled by an irresistible impulse.

"Hold!" said Domino, sternly, at the same time seizing Mardo's arm. "We belong to Blade the Sport—all ov us. We hev sworn not to tech anything that he owns. Keep yer oath an' live, Mardo; break it an' die!"

"Who said I war goin' to break it?"

"You war goin' to foller Floss."

"Yes, an' I will!"

With the last word, which rung with mad determination, Mardo broke from Domino's grasp, and whipped out a revolver as he started back.

His eyes were no longer those of a human being; there leaped from them all the passion and rage of a jungle demon.

"I'm Mardo, ef I am Blade's man!" he hissed. "Floss may walk over a cliff, fer I don't b'lieve in these sleep-walkers allus gittin' back to their beds alive. I'm goin' ter foller her."

"Not while I'm hyer."

"Yes."

"Never!"

Mardo stepped backward a pace, and raised his weapon.

Domino's revolver went up at the same time.

There would have been a deadly report if the third man had not thrown himself forward.

"Fools!" he exclaimed, knocking Mardo's weapon upward, and striking Domino's down. "The cap'n didn't hire us to eat each other up like wolves. Hark! somebody's comin' ag'in—no Floss this time."

The two desperadoes, abashed but not cooled down, turned toward the south and listened, but with their fingers at the trigger.

The galloping of a horse was distinctly heard.

"It's the cap'n at last!" said Domino. "We'll keep mum, Mardo."

"I ask no favors," was the grated response. "I'm liable to ask Blade, the Sport, whar he got that gal."

"An' break yer oath?"

"Yes; ef that's breakin' it."

It was a singular tableau that the three men presented in the mountain-pass, with a pale moon peeping over the edge of a dark cloud almost directly overhead.

Nearer and nearer came the horse, still unseen, although every hoof-beat was distinctly heard.

Mardo and Domino eyed one another madly while they listened.

All at once the animal and his rider came in sight.

"The cap'n! jes' ez I expected," dropped from Domino's lips, and the next moment he spoke a "halt!" in a tone that made the newcomer spring erect on the back of the horse and rein him in.

"It's Mardo, Domino, an' Lige," continued Domino; "an' you're the cap'n—home ag'in!"

"Thank Heaven! I have found you," exclaimed the rider, as he leaned forward and scrutinized the faces of the rough trio. "I am among the Cochetopa Hills once more—I am in my gold land!"

"We've been expectin' you, cap'n."

"I knew it. I knew a good deal about Montezuma an' his pards, for I've been where I had a chance to hear much."

"Thet war in—"

"Cl'ar Grit!"

"Montezuma got back, then?"

"I left him thar, but he's nearer us than you think."

"Is he comin' back?"

"He is comin' back!"

"Not alone?"

"The men of Cl'ar Grit are at his back. The old camp is broken up forever."

"I like that. We'll hev work to do now, cap'n."

"Work!" flashed Blade, the Sport, for he was the rider. "I am here to help you. Those men

shall never carry a nugget of gold beyond these Hills. While I rode hither I took an oath to that effect. Are you all here?"

"All but four, cap'n."

"How is Floss?"

This interrogative was put so suddenly that the three men instinctively started.

"She's hyer, jes' ez you left her, cap'n," answered Domino, after the interval of a second during which time he had taken occasion to glance furtively at Mardo.

"Good!" exclaimed the sport. "Now let us go down to the Palace. I'm anxious to see the rest of my men. We must get ready for the tussle for the golden bed we sleep on. It's no child's play, Domino. The men thet Montezuma leads are like him in more ways than one. A coward never lived in Cl'ar Grit."

Blade was urging his horse on again as he uttered the last words, but the hand of Domino seized the bridle-rein.

"Let's take the other road, cap'n," he said.

"It is the longest way."

"That's so, but it suits me best."

Blade gave the speaker a puzzled look but did not reply, and allowed Domino Dave to turn his horse into a narrow trail between the boulders.

The next moment the four men had left the spot, and were traversing a rough path between lofty walls not unlike the sides of a canyon.

Domino did not want his captain to reach home before Floss, the somnambulist, had returned to her couch.

This is why he led Blade the Sport's horse down the rocky trail.

Mardo and Lige walked a short distance behind Blade, at the head of whose horse stepped Domino.

Suddenly the sport was touched by his companion's hand, and he heard Domino's voice.

"Cap'n!"

"What, Domino?"

"Put your head down hyer a minute."

Blade obeyed, holding his breath while he waited for Domino to continue.

"Mardo's got his eyes on the gal," said the gold guard. "He wants to know what right you hev to her."

That was enough.

Blade, the Sport, started up with a mad, although half-suppressed exclamation.

"Don't tackle 'im hyer, cap'n."

The sport did not hear.

As he turned toward the two men walking behind him, a knife left his hands and whizzed through the air.

There was a shrill shriek as a man staggered back, and then a laugh was heard.

"Heavens! you've hit Lige an' not Mardo, cap'n!" exclaimed Domino.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIGHT FOR FLOSS.

"Go an' see, Domino!" said the sport.

Domino went forward and stooped over the fallen man.

"I war right, cap'n—it is Lige!" his voice said. "By Jove, I wish you had missed!"

"Is he dead?"

"Dead!"

"An' Mardo?"

"He sneaked off like a coward."

"To come back again some day!" said a voice, so near that the two men started and turned.

They recognized the voice.

A pistol-shot followed.

Domino had fired at the speaker.

"You hit the villain, Domino!" said the sport.

"Not quite, cap'n; but I can't stand any more such close shaves!" shouted Mardo back. "I'll come round ag'in, probably, when the men ov Cl'ar Grit git hyer. I've taken a fancy to Floss, an' I'm likely to give you trouble, Blade!"

Blade, the Sport ground his teeth as he slipped from the horse and put the reins into Domino's hand.

"Go on, clear to the Palace," he said in whispers at Domino's ears. "Don't disobey, for you have sworn to carry out all my commands. I'm goin' to settle with Mardo now."

Domino would probably have remonstrated if Blade had not reminded him of the oath which all of his followers had taken.

His fingers closed on the lines and he led the horse doggedly forward, while the sport stood still in the trail.

The sport had the tread of the mountain lion, and as he walked noiselessly through the dark shadows of cliff and tree the moon did not reveal his gleaming eyes nor his long black hair.

Domino and the horse had already disappeared, and Mardo was not to be seen; still Blade kept on.

If he could have looked some distance ahead he would have seen the man he was eager to meet.

Mardo was hurrying along a trail which leaving the low ground, was gradually ascending toward the tree-tops overhead.

"Hit the wrong pard fer once, didn't he?" the man said in tones of triumph. "I knew what war comin' when he hissed suthin' about fools an' ther questions, so I caught Lige an' pulled 'im inter my place. Gods! it was a close shave, an' then Domino's shot in the dark! The sport kin hev the lock thet bullet carried away if he finds it. An' the hull fall-out's about a gal, too. But she's a daisy—worth her weight in gold ef I knowned whar the right market war. Thet's what bothers me; but I'll find out. She knows whar she b'longs, an' I'll make her tell me. They'll all hunt me now—the hull set ov 'em, fer the killin' ov Lige will r'ile the hull gang, an' Cochetopa will git all-fired hot even afore the Cl'ar Grit men come."

Mardo had halted some distance from and many feet above the spot where Blade's knife had been used so fatally.

He did not see the half-catamountish figure which was listening with human interest to his words as they dropped from his lips.

All at once there was a slight noise at his right.

The desperado wheeled, lifting his revolver as he executed the movement.

"A b'ar! a—"

His sentence was cut short by a leap that carried a human figure over a huge stone, and planted it squarely on his breast,

"No word! no move!" was hissed into his ear as he caught a glimpse of his assailant.

"An Injun, by hokey!" flashed across Mardo's mind.

"Yes, an Injun!" was the response, uttered in a tone that proclaimed the speaker proud of his red skin. "Velvet Foot's hand is at Mardo's throat, an' his hand can send a knife to his heart. Blade has got to Cochetopa, eh? Does he know that Velvet Foot is here, too?"

"I don't know about that, but I think not," ventured Mardo. "He's not far off if you want him."

"Not now," said the Indian. "We meet by an'-by."

"An' then he'll get one ov his infernal knife drops on ye, mebbe."

A strange smile curled the Indian's thin lips, but he did not reply.

"Not long ago Velvet Foot met Blade in the San Juan country. Him on his way home then. Velvet Foot ride in stage, while Blade drive the horses to the gold-hunters' camp, but he never think of Velvet Foot then. There is a short way from Cl'ar Grit to Cochetopa, a way known only to Velvet Foot an' the crow. Blade's horse bring him here quick, but Velvet Foot travel the short way, an' he is here, too."

During this time Mardo was held by the Indian—Blade's red enemy—whose hands possessed the pressure of two vises.

He saw the glistening eyes of the red-skin—how they flashed when he talked of his coming to Cochetopa, and how they darkened balefully at the mere mention of the sport's name.

Such an enemy, Mardo mentally hoped, he would never have.

"Does Mardo know where the Cochetopa Rose is?" suddenly asked the Indian.

"Nobody knows it better," was the answer.

"Where is she?"

The desperado hesitated, spite of his situation.

Velvet Foot wanted Floss—the very girl he wanted himself, not for his wife, but to make money by. He felt that Floss was a stolen child, and he believed that she was a rich man's darling. Her wonderful beauty told him that it could not be otherwise.

The Indian evidently knew the secret he wanted to fathom.

His anxiety to know the whereabouts of the beautiful sleep-walker was convincing proof of this in Mardo's eyes.

What! should he tell Velvet Foot where Floss was?

The red-skin would find her; his cunning would baffle Blade, and he (Mardo), might whistle for the reward upon which he had set his heart.

"Why does Mardo hold his tongue!" asked the Indian, irritated by the desperado's silence. "Him no tell Velvet Foot where Cochetopa Rose is?"

"You would take her away, an'—"

"Velvet Foot will take her away!" was the eager interruption. "He has found the land she lives in at last. The Great Spirit is guidin' the Indian's feet along the trail he has hunted so long. Now speak, Mardo!"

In less than a minute Mardo had formed a plan of action.

He had taken desperate chances more than once during his wild career, and that when nothing of importance was at stake.

He had looked the Indian over as well as he could in the uncertain light of a poor moon and a few stars.

Velvet Foot was far from being his equal in physique.

Mardo was robust, well-limbed, six feet in his mountain moccasins—in short, almost a match for the bronzed giant Montezuma.

"I'll risk it," he said to himself, inaudibly, and the next instant he attempted to tear himself from the Indian's grasp.

Though taken by surprise, Velvet Foot soon recovered, but not until Mardo was nearly free.

"I'll tell you about Floss another time, red-skin!" he exclaimed, in tones of triumph.

But he was not yet free.

Suddenly the long arms of the Indian encircled him, and Mardo to his dismay discovered that his triumph had been of the briefest description.

Then he exerted all his strength, which was prodigious, to free himself again, but he found that he had in Velvet Foot a foeman worthy of his steel.

It was muscle to muscle now, red against white back and across that lonely mountain trail, which was backed by lofty walls at one side, and fringed by a precipice at the other.

Almost one hundred feet below ran another trail as dark and forbidding, but no men were battling there for the mastery.

Blade was not far away, coming on cautiously, lest he should startle the human quarry he hunted.

"Aha! that was my chance!" fell from Mardo's lips as he watched his opportunity, and threw the Indian against the rocky wall with a force that seemed to stun him. Velvet Foot's hands relaxed.

Mardo, with burning eyes, followed up his victory.

A moment later the Indian's feet was at the edge of the cliff.

Did the desperado spare him?

No!

"Go an' hunt Floss, an' may good luck foller you!" exclaimed Mardo as he released himself by a desperate effort from the red-skin, and saw him topple on the brink.

All of Velvet Foot's senses seemed to come back to him that terrible moment, but he could not prevent his fall.

Suddenly, without a cry, he disappeared from Mardo's sight, but his red hands caught on the rim of the wall.

The desperado sprung forward to cut them loose with the knife he had drawn, but when he reached the spot they had disappeared.

"Floss is mine," he exclaimed. "The men ov Cl'ar Grit will fix Blade when they come, an' I will sweep in the stakes ov the game."

Prompted by a natural curiosity, Mardo leaned over the wall and looked downward.

Here and there along the sheer descent grew numerous bushes strong enough to uphold a man's body.

What did Mardo see about thirty feet below him?

Two red hands clinging to one of these bushes and an upturned face—the face of Velvet Foot, the red hunter.

The moonlight fell against the wall and showed him this scene.

"I'll loosen yer hands!" he grated. "I'm goin' to take no more chances!"

Mardo covered the Indian with his revolver for a moment, then he fired.

At the echoing report, Velvet Foot's hands opened, he uttered a wild cry and fell again, but not to die.

The victor turned away, satisfied.

CHAPTER VIII.

WARNED, BUT DEFIANT.

"HYER we ar'. Look all around ye, boys. This is the Cochetopa region. Thar's gold—plenty ov it—in every hill ye see. We stand on hidden mines ov it. It shall all be ours; but we've got to fight fer it."

Need we say that the speaker was Montezuma the giant, or that he stood before the fearless gold-hunters whom he had guided to the wonderful land of gold?

Blade had ridden fast and without cessation toward the Cochetopa Hills after his escape from Clear Grit Camp; but the march of the fifty invaders had been slower and occupied more time.

But they were there—in the midst of Cochetopa, ready to begin the war for the hidden nuggets.

Their camp was situated at the foot of a lofty hill, densely wooded, even to its crest, and Montezuma had addressed them as we have just recorded just as the sun was sinking upon their first day in the gold region.

Nobody disbelieved Montezuma; they had seen good gold country before, and the aspect that surrounded them attested the truth of the giant's observations.

"If Dynamite war hyer, we'd be fixed," continued Montezuma after a brief pause. "But he'll come," and he glanced reassuringly at Chincapin, whose wounded hand was still bandaged, causing the youth's countenance to light up with hope. "I've knowed Dynamite to be missin' afore—when you didn't know 'im, Chincapin—an' he allers turned up O.K. I kin fancy him sw'arin' over the burnin' camp, but when he reads the paper I left for 'im in ther tree, he'll come on. Thar's no discount on Dynamite, pards."

When the giant had concluded he walked to where Chincapin stood and touched the youth's arm.

"Come with me," he said, in a low tone. "I want you to see suthin' afore it gits dark."

Wondering what Montezuma had to show him, Chincapin signified his willingness to accompany the giant, and the twain glided from the crowd almost wholly unperceived.

A short distance from the camp Montezuma turned into a trail that zig-zagged up the hill.

Chincapin followed without a question.

Night closed slowly about them, but the giant kept on.

He pushed forward like a person familiar

with the ground which he traversed. Perhaps he had been there before.

"Hyer we stop, Chincapin," he said, stopping suddenly and turning to the youth. "It's most too dark to show you what I want you to see, but look yonder—thar it is!"

Chincapin looked over Montezuma's outstretched hand, and saw what he had not noticed before, a rough board fastened to a tree about ten feet above the ground.

"Thar's one ov 'em notices to trespassers what I saw when the boys an' I war hyer prospectin'," Montezuma continued with a grim, defiant smile. "Go up an' look at it, Chincapin; it won't bite."

The young Western surgeon advanced to the tree, and stepped upon a stone conveniently placed at the root, as if for the purpose of accommodating persons of medium stature.

The last streaks of the short mountain twilight fell upon the board but Chincapin could not make out the inscription upon it.

"I'll help ye, youngster!" suddenly exclaimed the bronzed giant, and the next moment Chincapin was lifted bodily from the ground as if he were a mere child and elevated until his head was on a level with the board.

"Now read what Blade hez written thar, Chincapin. Thet notice might scare some chaps, but for us—bah!"

While Montezuma spoke, Chincapin deciphered the rather well shaped letters that formed the words of the inscription which was as follows:

"Notice to trespassers:—

"Havin' a right to the gold of Cochetopa by discovery, I for'bid any man, red or white, to touch a nugget or stake a claim. Death will follow either act! Beware! I mean bizness! I am here in force to guard my claims and to kill!"

"BLADE, THE SPORT."

This notice was pinned to the board by two formidable bowie-knives whose hilts were rusty, showing that they had performed their duty for a long time.

A smile played with the corners of Chincapin's mouth while he perused the notice held up by Montezuma's strong arms.

"Read it fer my benefit, boy," said the giant. "I want to hear how the fool's words sound on the tongue of another."

Chincapin proceeded to gratify his companion and read the sentences in a clear tone.

Suddenly, and just as the youth was pronouncing the name appended to the warning, a loud report awoke the echoes of the locality, and the board was shivered into a thousand splinters!

"Jehosaphat!" exclaimed Montezuma, recoiling from the tree forgetful of the person he held aloft, and the result was that Chincapin fell ingloriously to the ground. "The ball hez opened, an' I'm hyer to help it on! Whar's the skunk that fired that shot? It war intended fer yer head, Chincapin."

The youth by this time had scrambled to his feet, proof enough that he had escaped injury, and, revolver in hand, was gazing in the direction from which the almost fatal shot had come.

"He dar'n't show his carkiss, ther white-livered wolf!" grated Montezuma in tones intend-

ed for other ears than Chincapin's. "Ef he can't shoot any better than that, he'd better break his rifle, an' let a grizzly chaw 'im up."

There was no response to these words, and Montezuma and Chincapin stood in the deepening shadows with their fingers at the triggers of their revolvers, waiting vainly for a grapple with their foe.

"Wal, he bu'sted Blade's warnin' all to thunder, anyhow!" resumed Montezuma, a twinkle of merriment relieving the fiery flashes in his eyes. "Come, Chincapin, we'll go back to camp, an' let ther boys laugh at ther poor shot."

The youth was reluctant to turn away without a brush with the man who had just fired at his head.

The darkness had saved his life and destroyed the board, no thanks to the coward's aim.

The touch that Montezuma gave him when he advised a return to camp roused him as though a snake had hissed in his path and then glided away.

He started forward impulsively, a sentence of defiance on his lips.

"I am here to stay until I see fit to depart!" he flashed. "I will never leave Cochetopa at Blade's warning. No threats shall intimidate me! My name is Chincapin, coward! Go an' tell your master that I am here, marked for life by one of his accursed bowies."

"An' I'm hyer to back Chincapin in all he says!" exclaimed the giant, springing toward the young man. "Thar's fifty ov us hyer, an' every mother's son ov 'em hez come to stay!"

At that moment from a point fifty yards down the trail a jet a flaine leaped from the gloom.

It was followed by the whiz of a bullet and a man's mad oath. The latter just behind Chincapin.

The youth threw one glance backward; he saw Montezuma staggering away with the oath still quivering his lips—the giant had stopped the second bullet!

Without stopping to see Montezuma strike the ground at the foot of the tree where lay the shattered pieces of Blade's board of warning, Chincapin darted forward.

"The fight for Cochetopa and revenge might as well begin here as elsewhere!" fell from his lips.

A few eager bounds took him far down the trail, but he found no one.

"It was a coward's shot, and the villain dares not face a wounded man!" he said, aloud, as he halted on a spot wild and strange, and totally unknown to him.

Tall trees lifted their cones far toward the heavens, and rendered the hill trail darker and lonelier than ever.

The youth imagined Montezuma lying dead back where he had been struck, and this thought heated his blood.

The men of Clear Grit had already lost their guide and tower of strength. Nobody could fill his place but Dynamite Dan, but where was that worthy?

It was a question in Chincapin's mind whether he was living.

The young miner-doctor reflected until he heard the unmistakable neigh of a horse.

He instantly turned, because the animal was between him and Montezuma.

"I'll see what it means," he exclaimed, clutching his revolver more firmly, and striding back with undaunted step. "I shall keep my word if I lose my life. Blade and his minions shall not drive me from these hills!"

Chincapin went boldly in the direction toward which he had turned, as eager to meet his enemies as they were to clear Cochetopa of its invaders.

"Halt, thar!" rung out so suddenly and shrill that the youth instinctively recoiled.

At the same time there appeared in the trail, not one horse, but four, and on the back of each sat a stalwart figure, whose head and face were covered with a grotesque mask and hood combined.

"The men whom Montezuma and his fellow spies fought when they were here before," said Chincapin to himself. "If they think they have corralled me, they may find themselves mistaken."

Standing erect before the horses of the masked gold-guards of Cochetopa, with his revolver cocked in his right hand, and his faultless figure drawn to its true stature, the youth presented a picture of fearlessness that would have commanded an enemy's admiration.

"Wal, you chaps hev come," came over the horse's ears after a brief interval.

"Yes," said Chincapin, "we ar' here."

"Hyer to stay?"

"Yes."

Did the eyes of the four men glitter maliciously?

Before another word could be said, one of the men applied a lighted lucifer to something like a tightly-wrapped ball of tow, and tossed it forward.

It struck the ground at Chincapin's feet, and, blazing up, revealed him to the quartette.

"Don't step on that fire, boy!" said the thrower. "It might be onhealthy fer ye. Drop that revolver an' hold up yer hands!"

Chincapin's lips met; his eyes flashed.

To drop his weapon and stand helpless before those men would be eating the words of defiance to which he had lately given utterance.

He did not obey, but held the revolver with steady nerves.

"What! do you want to die afore you've touched a nugget?" followed the command to drop the deadly weapon. "Ain't yer name Chincapin?"

"It is!"

"I thought so. You've got a bad hand thar—a present from Blade, the Sport."

The dialogue was interrupted by the crack of a rifle.

One of the hoods pitched over his horse's head like a man shot instantly to the death, and fell quivering to the earth.

The others turned toward the unseen slayer.

The three then wheeled their steeds but not until one had leaned forward with the dexterity of a Comanche and the strength of a giant to lift the fallen comrade.

"We'll meet ag'in, Chincapin!" exclaimed one of the hoods.

"Any time!"

At that moment the deadly rifle spoke again, and another hood fell forward on his steed's neck where his hands closed on the mane.

"I wonder," said Chincapin to himself, "who is doin' that killin'?"

CHAPTER IX.

FLOSS.

In less than five minutes after the last deadly shot the two remaining masks had disappeared and Chincapin stood alone on the trail.

The fire-ball still blazed at his feet, and his finger had not left the trigger of his revolver.

Having escaped the gold guards of Cochetopa, he was waiting for the unseen slayer as if certain he would come.

But Chincapin waited in vain.

"I'd like to see him," murmured the youth; "but if I cannot, why I must go back to Montezuma. I owe the killer whoever he is a good turn for the future, if the opportunity ever occurs. I trust Montezuma lives. Ah! we cannot spare the giant thus early in the game."

Seeing no prospect of encountering the mysterious marksman who had rendered him such efficient service, Chincapin retraced his steps to the spot where the warning board had been shattered, and where he had left the giant at full length on the ground.

He dreaded to reach the place, for he expected to find Montezuma dead where he had fallen, but instead he saw a man leaning against the tree, as motionless as a statue.

"It war a close shave, Chincapin, fer I see it's you," said a well-known voice, which drew an exclamation of joy from the youth's heart. Jes' put yer hand alongside my face. Thar! thar's a reg'lar furrow thar—made by thet skunk's bullet. Did yer meet any one? I heard two shots."

Chincapin soon told his story.

"I've got an idea who thet killer is; but we must go back to camp first," said Montezuma, at the conclusion of the narrative. "The fight fer the Cochetopa bonanza opened to-night. They must shoot better than they hev if they want my life. I'll get my work in from this moment; then look out, Chincapin."

Chincapin could not see the blazing eyes of the stalwart gold-hunter; but he could hear the grating of teeth after the last word.

The pair turned their faces toward the camp they had lately left. The masked gold-guards were no myths, and Chincapin felt that the struggle for the possession of the new gold country would prove desperate.

If he could have followed the masked horsemen of the hills, he would have seen them ride into a dense thicket-like copse, a goodly distance from the scene of their discomfiture.

Once beyond the fringe of the thicket, they dismounted, and led their steeds by the bridle-reins deeper among the slender trees that grew in profusion on every side, making an admirable retreat for mountain brigands or wild beasts.

Across two saddles lay the men whose lives had been taken by the unseen slayer; the bodies were held to their places by living men, who

had discarded their hoods, revealing dark, brown faces and flashing eyes.

"Halt!" rung suddenly out on the night air.

One of the men answered the command with a word which seemed a countersign, for the sentinel, until that moment unseen, stepped aside, and the twain passed on.

At last they abandoned the horses and their ghastly burdens and kept on alone.

Five minutes later they stood on the floor of a large, well-lighted cave, whose entrance was concealed by a good-sized cabin built of rough logs.

More than twenty men occupied the underground compartment, around the walls of which were hung firearms of every description, but for the most part elegant repeating rifles of the most modern pattern.

The men themselves were mostly handsome, but wild-looking fellows, dressed in gray shirts and dark brown pants, which together seemed to be a regulation uniform of some kind.

With few exceptions they were athletes, typical desperadoes of the West, men who combine strength and physique with fearlessness and cunning.

The cave was large enough to hold twice the number that occupied it when the twain entered, their countenances proclaiming disaster before a word had passed their lips.

Instantly, those who were reclining on the ground, sprung up, and the pair found themselves surrounded in the twinkling of an eye.

"They ar' hyer!" said one of the party. "The flight fer Cochetopa hez opened."

Exclamations, oaths were heard on every side.

"Whar ar' they? We ar' ready ter keep up ther tussle. Blade ain't hyer—that's a fact—but what ov thet?"

"We'll bury ther boys first, I reckon."

"What boys?"

"Puma Jack an' Tampa Tom."

"Whar ar' they?"

"Out yonder," and the speaker pointed toward the thicket.

"Dead?"

"Dead!"

"Who did it?" asked twenty voices as forty eyes seemed to emit sparks of fire.

"Thet's what we don't know. We didn't git to see the killer fer ther skunk wouldn't show himself."

"But we'll find 'im! He b'longs to the Cl'ar Grit band ov course."

"If it warn't Mardo."

At this suggestion, there was a coarse laugh, which came from toward the mouth of the cavern.

Every eye was instantly turned in that direction.

"The cap'n himself!" exclaimed several.

Yes, the man who had laughed was Blade, the Sport, and he stood in full view under the stone arched door of the cavern with the light fairly striking him, and his arms folded upon his breast.

He had come so noiselessly, like a specter, that his approach had been noticed by no one.

"Don't talk about Mardo the meddler shooting any one!" he continued. "He's beyond that,

He hasn't been able to lift a rifle for two days. I didn't have to trail the traitor long; it took but one throw!"

"But who dropped Jack an' Tom, cap'n?"

Bowie Blade's brow darkened at this question.

"One of the bravest men that lives," he answered.

"Montezuma!" exclaimed several; but the sport did not reply.

"I need not tell you, men of Cochetopa, that the invaders have come," he said, after a moment's silence. "They have camped scarcely one hundred yards from the mouth of Cata-mountain Mine, but that is not all. The Indians have come back."

"We don't care fer them, cap'n," exclaimed one of Blade's auditors. "The men ov Cl'ar Grit ar' wolves, ther red-skins coyotes. Don't mention them."

"But I must, because they are here," said the sport, firmly. "We must take account of all our enemies—the white man first ov course."

"Sart'inly."

"The buryin' first—then the attack!"

"On the camp?"

"Yes."

"To-night, cap'n?"

"To-night."

To these words a beautiful young girl listened in the cabin which had been erected before the mouth of the cave.

She stood but a few feet behind Blade, and among the shadows so that he saw her not.

Her eyes dilated with wonderment as she listened, her heart seemed to stand still.

A new revelation seemed to dawn upon her mind.

Who had invaded Cochetopa, and what was going to take place?

As Blade the Sport, spoke for the last time, and the occupants of the cavern started toward the opening, she retreated to a small apartment at one side of the narrow corridor in which she had listened, and threw herself upon a couch that touched the wall.

"No noise goin' through the hut, boys; Floss is asleep," said Blade as he led his gold guards through the cabin.

The girl simulated the breathing of a sleeping person while the men filed past the door.

She could hear the touch of steel to steel, and now and then a half-muffled word—nothing more, until the last man had apparently passed out.

"He will come now," said the girl, half addibly.

Is if in answer to her words, the door leading to the uncouth chamber opened, and she was conscious that some one had entered.

"She isn't hyer," said a voice after a moment of the deepest silence.

"Hyer's whar she oughter be, for this is Blade's home, but I find it empty."

It was a strange voice, and it kept the single listener glued to the couch with her heart in her throat.

Had one of the gold men come back for her?

No, it could not be, for she knew the voice of each one, and the names of all, but the tones in which the words just heard had been spoken were strange and unknown to her.

"It's kind o' queer," continued the invader of the cabin, after a moment's silence. "Mebbe I'd better hunt her elsewhar. She might be out thar whar ther light is—I'll go an' see."

Floss heard the speaker withdraw, and after a minute's reflection she crept to the door and looked out into the corridor whose walls consisted of logs like the main walls of the hut itself.

She saw the fire burning on the floor of the cavern lighting up the interior of the place, but she saw more than this.

In the full glare of the blaze was the figure of a man—a man with broad shoulders, and fully armed.

He was alone, and to the girl he seemed astonished at the extent of the cave he had doubtless entered for the first time.

Floss watched him with intense curiosity. She could not take her eyes from his person.

That he was Blade the Sport's enemy she well knew, for she had never seen him before.

"This ain't keepin' my oath very fast," she heard him say, suddenly. "I'm in the lions' den, but ther lions ar' out. Mebbe I'd better leave my compliments, but in what shape?—that puzzles me. I'd hev given everything if I hed found the girl. Floss! Floss! you don't know who I am, nor what I want, er you'd be hyer!"

With a light cry, the almost breathless listener started forward, but suddenly stopped and shrunk back again.

The man had moved; he was drawing some half-burned sticks from the fire, and was arranging them on the floor of the cavern.

He was engaged more than five minutes at this work, then he stood erect again, surveyed his completed task with eyes aglow with a tiger's satisfaction, and turned abruptly away.

Floss sprung back into the room and waited for him to pass out.

She heard his footsteps go by the door. He was gone at last.

Almost devoured by curiosi y, she glided into the cave, and stood over the stranger's work.

The blackened sticks had been curiously placed by the man who hunted her, and she was not long discovering that they formed rough letters intended to be read by some one.

After a little work, which was up-hill toiling at first, Floss mastered the lettering, which formed three words:

"I'M HYER—DYNAMITE!"

To the girl these words seemed a challenge, but for whom?

For Blade, the Sport, of course.

"Dynamite! It is a name he hates!" she exclaimed. "I overheard him tell Domino last night that this Dynamite, whoever he is, would never come to Cochetopa, but he is here. Blade has counted without his host. What did he tell me once about Dynamite? They are old enemies, and he said that this man would try to take me away one of these days. Ah! I know now. Dynamite knows who I am. He may be my father. Heavens! why did I not think of this before?"

With her question unanswered, Floss turned and rushed from the cavern; she went past the

door that led to her room and out into the night, but not unarmed!

She had stopped in the cave long enough to arm herself, and now she stood on the trail lately made by Dynamite, the mysterious man.

He could not be far away.

She would follow him and satisfy her doubts.

All at once a figure rose in her path and caused her to start forward with an exclamation of discovery on her lips.

The next moment a hand closed on her arm, and she looked into a face darker than any she had seen for many a day.

"The Cochetopa Rose at last!" ejaculated a voice which sent a shudder through the girl's frame. "One of Velvet Foot's trails is near its end—the other leads to the white chief's heart!"

In vain Floss tried to break from her captor's grasp. She could not use the weapon she had carried from the cavern, for a red hand encircled her wrist, and she was lifted from the ground as though she had been a mere child.

CHAPTER X.

GREEK MEETS GREEK.

VELVET FOOT—for Floss's captor was the red trailer whom we left at Mardo's mercy—hastened from the spot by a trail that did not bring him in contact with the men of Cochetopa, who, deep in the thicket in front of the cabin, were performing the rites of burial over the two men shot by the mysterious slayer.

"Where was Dynamite Dan?

If Floss did not get to follow him we will—for his hand is to perform deadly work before dawn.

Failing to find the girl whom he expected to encounter in the cabin, and pleased with his arrangement of the half-burned sticks on the cavern floor, he hurried through the thicket and down a path which, two hours later, brought him unexpectedly upon a camp, at the outskirts of which he heard the clicking of rifle locks, followed by a "Halt!" which he instantly obeyed.

He was instantly surrounded by the roughly-dressed pickets, who recognized him with ejaculations of joy.

"Whar's ther boy?" asked Dynamite.

"Here!" and Chincapin appeared to the old vengeance-hunter.

For a moment the eyes of the twain regarded each other in a manner that riveted the attention of all who watched them.

"I'm sure ov it no v," said Montezuma, who looked on over the bandages that covered his face. "They ar' father an' son—I don't care what the others think about it."

All at once Dynamite turned to the men of Clear Grit.

"I blamed ye fer burnin' ther old camp when I first saw the fire, but I don't now," he said. "We will stay hyer an' win Cochetopa, or die! I am with you ef I hev got other bizness on my hands. Blade ar' hyer, but you know it. Remember that he b'longs to me!"

"Yes, to you—I allus thought you hed a right to him, Dynamite," said Montezuma.

"He is mine!" said Dynamite, looking at the giant. "Let no man forget that. I have been to their cave. She warn't thar!"

The men started.

"Thar's a gal mixed up in his bizness somehow," muttered Montezuma. "I never thought ov thet, although I might hev knowed thet thar ought ter be a woman somewhar along the line. You didn't find her, then?"

His question was addressed aloud to Dynamite Dan.

The avenger started and glanced at Chincapin. It was evident that the boy, too, was astonished.

"No more!" he exclaimed. "The girl part is my bizness, not yours, men ov Cl'ar Grit! A funeral war goin' on when I left the cave. I shot twice to-night an' at each crack a man fell."

"Then I owe my life to you!" cried Chincapin.

Dynamite smiled.

"Think so if you want to, boy," he said, with the smile still lingering on his lips. "I opened the ball an' made two graves at the same time. The hoods had you foul, but they didn't keep you thar long, eh, Chincapin? Men ov Cl'ar Grit—"

Dynamite Dan paused abruptly, for a loud voice assailed the ears of all.

"Death to the invaders of Cochetopa! Give 'em graves instead ov gold. Fire!"

Before the camp could recover from the effect of these thrilling words, a volley that seemed to shake the everlasting hills obeyed the command just spoken, and men tumbled right and left.

It was a deadly volley, for few of the gold-hunters who struck the earth ever rose again, and hard upon it came the rapid shots from the chambers of repeating rifles, which were fired from a point above the camp.

"Graves instead ov nuggets fer Cl'ar Grit's spawn!" cried the same voices that had just assailed the invaders' ears. "Not a man shall touch a yeller stone! Pour it into 'em! Death to the San Juan wolves."

Dynamite Dan was among the number who had not been touched.

"They ar' hyer before I looked fer 'em," he said, as he leaped to Chincapin's side, for the youth had miraculously escaped death. "Come, Chincapin, we must git out ov this. It's Blade's day now—ours will come."

The youth, who had drawn his revolver at the first word of the leader of the attacking party, hesitated, and threw a defiant look upward, where the night was being cut by swords of fire.

"I thought we were going to fight for Cochetopa," he said.

"So we ar', but we can't now; the odds ar' ag'in' us," answered Dynamite. "Hyar's Montezuma. We must go."

"Fer the present—yes," grated the bronzed giant. "The rest ar' savin' themselves to fight another time. Who looked fer a tussle to-night?"

Chincapin found himself being dragged away by the two men before he could frame a reply, and a minute later the three were safe from the balls which the gold guards of Cochetopa were still pouring mercilessly into the camp.

The rest of the gold-hunters who had escaped had already sought safety in flight. It did not show cowardice, for to stand still, even if they

had resisted, would have resulted in death certain and speedy.

Not a shot replied to the destructive volleys, and presently the last repeater ceased its play, and a loud cheer of victory soared skyward.

"Let 'em shout!" grated Montezuma, whose eyes blazed with defiance as he listened to the echoes of that startling cry. "I wouldn't stop it ef I could. But the boys back thar will be avenged. Eh, Dynamite?"

"This victory will soon be forgotten by them hounds up thar!" was the reply. "The boys ar'n't all dead. We kin muster a respectable number to-morrer."

"I don't wan't another man," said the giant. "The fewer we ar' in numbers, the bigger will be the divide when we get the bonanzas of Cochetopa. You an' me, an' Chincapin, Dynamite, thar'll be millions for each one."

Chincapin did not reply, but he gave Montezuma a glance of reproof of which no notice was taken.

"Ov course while we fight for Cochetopa we'll not forget to-night's work," continued Montezuma. "I've hunted fer gold an' vengeance afore at the same time an' got both, but it warn't in this kentry. Shall we wait hyar fer the boys?"

"No! foller me."

"To the death, Dynamite!"

Without speaking, but with a glance at Chincapin, Dynamite Dan started from the spot where they had halted after the fight, and began to climb a narrow path that led up the hill.

Chincapin and Montezuma followed at his heels.

"Don't I know jes' what he's goin' to do?" murmured the giant. "Dynamite never war known to let grass grow under his feet in a call of this kind. We're in fer some hot work, an' I'll stand by the old chap. Gods! my face hurts jes' ez if it wants satisfaction, an' it's likely to get it soon!"

Dynamite Dan did not pause until the three had reached a place which was situated many feet above the gold-hunters' camp.

All at once voices assailed their ears.

"They're whar I thought they war," Dynamite said. "You didn't know, Montezuma, that I've been hyer afore."

"On this trail?" asked the giant, astonished.

"Yes."

"Thet's news to me."

"It war years ago, but no more ov this now. Stay hyer. I'll reconnoiter."

Chincapin and Montezuma saw their companion glide ahead and soon disappear.

Dynamite crept forward with the noiseless movements of the panther, and carrying a repeating rifle at full cock.

It was not real dark, for a pallid moon showed the scout the dark trees overhead, and the trail that wound like a serpent round the hill.

Suddenly Dynamite halted and listened, and looked intently as he leaned over a huge moss-covered boulder.

He saw a dark, moving mass about twenty yards from the stone, and voices reached his ears.

At that moment the moon went behind a

cloud, obliterating all traces of the men who had poured volleys of deadly lead among the gold-hunters.

Dynamite looked up and waited for the moon's reappearance.

For the first time in his life he was impatient.

"When the moon shows herself again, somebody dies!" he said sternly.

"Montezuma an' Chincapin kin come up ef they want to; but I'd rather the boy'd stay back."

Three minutes later the white queen of night came forth again, and Dynamite Dan looked ahead once more.

He saw the same objects he had seen a moment before.

"This fer the graves you've made to-night in Cochetopa!" he grated, with all the rage of an avenger, as he threw the repeating fire-arm against his shoulder. "I'm Dynamite, an' more than that—I'm death!"

The next instant he was emptying the contents of the deadliest rifle in Colorado among the gold-guards of Cochetopa!

He fired with a rapidity that was startling.

"They've got behiud us!" came from the men who, taken by surprise, recoiled from the continuous flash of Dynamite's rifle. "Stand yer ground, pards. No runnin' from the wolves ov Cl'ar Grit. This is war to the knife!"

"An' ther bowie to the hilt!" shouted Dynamite, as two figures reached his side, and swelled the attack with their weapons.

"You hyer?" cried the avenger, seeing Chincapin at his elbow.

"Why not? Those men ar' my foes as well as yours. We ar' fightin' for Cochetopa."

"I'm hyer fer more than that!"

Chincapin did not reply, for the gold-guards had recovered and bullets were whistling about the trio's heads.

Hatless and looking more than wild, with his bandaged face and long hair clotted with his own blood, Montezuma, the giant, kept firing at the enemy.

"Charge 'em, men!" rung out above the heavy firing.

The men of Cochetopa answered with a wild cheer and rushed forward.

Dynamite turned to Chincapin.

"We must go!" he said.

"No! I retreated once to-night. I will stay here!"

"Ye're a fool, boy," and Dynamite seized the youth and forced him back by main strength.

"Yes, go; I'll cover the retreat," said the giant to Chincapin; and without looking to see whether he had been obeyed or not, he turned once more to the desperadoes with the heavy revolvers he had just reloaded.

"I'm hyer fer gold an' satisfaction!" he exclaimed, opening on the band rushing forward, and straight at the muzzles of his outstretched weapons.

A series of yells was the answer.

If Montezuma was brave even to foolhardiness, the men who were bound to Blade with an oath were not cowards. Montezuma's revolvers were not the first they had faced.

He emptied the steel chambers squarely into the enemy's ranks, but in vain.

Men fell back shot through the brain, or heart-pierced, but their comrades did not stop. They sprung over the boulder that protected the lower half of the giant's body, and rushed upon him like a pack of wolves.

His last shots were muffled reports, for the muzzles of his weapons touched living breasts.

It was a thrilling moment!

CHAPTER XI.

FOES MEET AND FIGHT.

BEFORE the human wolves of Cochetopa touched Montezuma, Dynamite Dan had dragged Chincapin back, and forced him from the scene.

The youth was reluctant to go, and indignation blazed in his eyes.

"We fly like cowards an' leave Montezuma to his fate!" crossed his lips, while Dynamite gripped his arm some distance from the scene of attack and out of sight of the combatants.

"Never mind the big miner; he's got out ov worse scrapes than that," was the answer. "Our bizness is to stay hyer no longer. You forget, Chincapin, what brought me to Cochetopa."

Chincapin did not reply.

The sounds of the struggle over and around the big boulder had already died away.

What had become of Montezuma?

It was more than probable that he had been overpowered and killed by Blade's infuriated gold guards, who had already sworn to take the life of every invader of the Cochetopa Hills.

If Dynamite Dan and Chincapin had stayed, they would have shared a like fate, for three men, notwithstanding their heroism, could never have checked the ferocity of the charging party.

"They'll be huntin' us next," resumed Dynamite. "Thet silence means suthin'-death to you an' I, boy, ef they git the drop on us!"

The fierce light in Chincapin's eyes did not abate.

He had never seen Dynamite Dan so solicitous for his safety before, and more than once he was on the eve of putting a question that would have startled Blade's trailer, but he kept silent.

The pair glided from the spot where they had halted after their retreat from the boulder. Dynamite never removed his gaze from his companion; he seemed to fear that the youth would give him the slip, and go to the giant's aid.

All at once, a goodly distance from the bloody spot, and on a level with the gold-hunters' camp, the twain saw several dark figures rise in the trail before them, and a stern command to halt and proclaim themselves, came over the barrels of as many leveled repeating-rifles.

"Ther boys!" fell from Dynamite's tongue, in accents which immediately lowered the weapons, and a moment later the five men mingled together.

"Whar's ther rest ov ye?" asked Dynamite, quickly. "It can't be that ther ar' but five ov us left—five out ov fifty?"

"Thet's ther way it looks, Dynamite," was the doleful answer. "Ther wolves ov Cochetopa got ther drop on us, an' no mistake. Jehu!"

did you ever see such shootin'? You weren't thar at ther time. The boys tumbled in every direction, ginerally shot dead; fer I noticed that they never got up ag'in arter they struck ther ground. We got out ov ther *melee* somehow—jes' how nobody human kin tell. But hyer we ar', ready—"

"Ready to go back an' rebuild Clear Grit?" asked Chincapin.

"Not much, youngster! We haven't touched a nugget in Cochetopa yet, an' we came hyer ter win ther big bonanza. Don't forget that!"

Chincapin could not repress a smile.

The thought of five men wrestling Cochetopa from Blade the Sport and his men bordered on the foolish.

"We got more than gold to get," continued the brawny miner who had replied to the youth's interruption. "Think ov ther dead men lyin' back yonder! Jes' let the sound of Blade's rifles ring in yer ears fer a minute, an' ye'll not think ov goin' back to ther old camp, without paying ther debt with bloody interest. Let us swear hyer ter stay till we've avenged our pards!"

"Don't do that, men of Clear Grit!" said a voice that caused the five to recoil. "Better go back to the gold trails in the valley of the San Juan. The wolves of Cochetopa are many, an' their teeth are sharp. They do more than growl—they bite!"

The voice ceased, and left the miners staring breathless at one another.

One of the survivors of the camp dashed forward with an oath, but Dynamite, just as agile despite his age, sprung after him, and dragged him back by main force.

"Don't be a fool, Kino," he said. "Thet chap has all ther advantage, an' ther drop ar' his ef he wants it."

The man looked mad and half bewildered for a moment.

"War it Blade?" he asked.

"No."

"Who, then?"

"No difference who I think he is," said Dynamite. "I'm ther man ter find him—not you. Go back to ther boys, an' above all things, keep Chincapin from breaking loose. If anything happens to him I'll hold you accountable. Go back."

"An' you?"

"Oh, I'm goin' to see a man," and with this Kino found himself pushed back, and when he recovered Dynamite had disappeared.

"Thet voice sounded like one I think I shall never forget," he said, half audibly to himself, as he started forward. "He said he would never give up the trail, an' I tol'l him that Blade b'longed to me. But he would not say that he would not wipe that accursed hound out if he got the chance. An' now he's hyer in the Cochetopa kentry on ther same mission that brought me into it. I want to see him. Thet war his voice and I know it. I want to tell Velvet Foot that he may hunt Floss if he wants to; but that Blade is my man, an' no one else's."

Dynamite Dan had marked the spot as well as he could from whence the voice just heard had proceeded.

The gold guards of Cochetopa elated by their signal victory over the invaders were still abroad, although the death-shots of Montezuma and his companions had evidently thinned their numbers.

He crept forward, however, nor paused until he believed he was near the spot where the unseen speaker had lately stood.

A silence almost as profound as that of the grave pervaded the gloomy landscape. The hills that rose above the miner looked gloomier than ever, and their thick forests of trees seemed to touch the ink-like sky overhead.

"I guess I came too late," murmured Dynamite, speaking in a low whisper. "He isn't hyer, an' I can't see a trail ov any kind. But—sh! what war thet?"

It was well that Dynamite asked himself that question, for a sound that soon proclaimed the approach of some one, and on horseback at that greeted his ears, and he stepped aside with his face turned down the scarcely perceptible trail that ran by his feet.

The moment was one of suspense to the grizzled miner who waited for the mounted man.

"I would give my right arm if it war the man I've been huntin' all these years!" he ejaculated. "To meet him hyer would pay me fer all my trailin'. I would keep the oath I took among ther ruins ov Cl'ar Grit, but I'd make 'im take me to Floss first."

Dynamite Dan ceased abruptly, for the horseman was in sight, darker than the nocturnal landscape which was dimly relieved by the palest of moons.

"Ha! I can go back an' call Floss mine more than ever now!" said a voice so suddenly that Dynamite's revolver was lifted in spite of himself. "The boys got in some good shots tonight; their rifles strengthened my title to Cochetopa. The pards ov Cl'ar Grit war fools—downright idiots! They might have known from Montezuma's reports that this was a land of death as well as one great gold mine. Men will never learn anything in this region only at the repeater's muzzle."

The rider who filled the mountain saddle with the grace of an old horseman was approaching while he talked.

Not a word escaped Dynamite's ear.

"He's goin' to Floss, fer he hez jes' said so," murmured the old trailer. "He shall take me thar before I let 'im know that I'm in Cochetopa. He hezn't seen the words I spelt on the floor ov ther cave with ther burnt sticks, fer he hezn't been thar since."

Meanwhile Dynamite was shielding his body with the bushes that fringed the hillside trail, but his eyes, fierce and blazing, full of sparks of fire, as it were, were riveted on the horseman, whose identity was no longer questioned—it was Blade.

The sport rode by looking neither to the right nor to the left, but straight ahead, dreamless of the proximity of the human wolf who had hunted him so long.

His last word lingered in Dynamite's ears, for the avenging miner was creeping through the shadows at the horse's heels.

"Ef you thought I war hyer thar'd be suthin' to pay fer now, Blade," muttered the trailer,

with his eyes fastened on the horseman. "Take me to Floss—that's all I ask. Thar we'll settle everything—thar you'll lose er make good forever yer claim to Cochetopa."

The cavern occupied at times by Blade the Sport and his gold-guards was not far from the spot where Dynamite had encountered him.

The old trailer glided after the sport through the thicket, beyond which we have already taken the reader, and saw him dismount in front of the little cabin that fronted the cave.

"At last! I knowed he'd bring me hyer," said Dynamite, with glittering eyes that could not keep down his triumph. "He'll find Floss, if I did not. As fer Chincapin, Kino an' his pards will take care ov ther boy. If they let harm come to him while I'm away thar'll be a settlement when I get back."

Blade had already entered the cabin, the door of which he left open so that Dynamite could look down the log-walled corridor, and see the fire still burning on the cavern floor.

Did he enter at the sport's heels?

No! he crept to the door past the horse's head, and followed him with his gleaming eyes.

Blade stopped midway down the corridor.

"He's lookin' fer Floss," said Dynamite, as the desperado suddenly vanished. "Thar! he hezn't found her—she isn't hyer."

Standing erect in the corridor between his watcher and the fire, Blade's handsome figure was plainly seen.

"She isn't here!" fell from his lips in tones of half-suppressed rage. "Some person has invaded my domain. Can it be that—"

He checked himself and sprung toward the cavern.

The next instant he stood in front of Dynamite's strange lettering on the ground.

"I feared it!" he suddenly grated. "He is here—in Cochetopa to carry out, if he can, the oath he took years ago. He has found Floss; he has taken her away, but I will follow!"

At that moment an object appeared in Blade's path; the far-reaching fire-light revealed the invader of Cochetopa.

A wild cry of recognition and of tigerish eagerness as well, burst from the sport's throat.

He saw his enemy dashing forward.

"Take this!" he flashed, suddenly raising the bowie which he had grasped at the point, and hurling it forward.

Dynamite fell upon the astonished sport whom he threw staggering through the fire with the strength and rage of a gorilla.

CHAPTER XII.

BLADE ON TOP.

We have said that Dynamite disarmed his enemy and hurled him through the fire.

He did more than this; he leaped through the blaze after him, and struck the floor of the cavern beyond it just as the sport was regaining his feet.

"It's my day, Blade—you've had yours!" exclaimed Dynamite, facing the man of Cochetopa with a face rendered somber by the hate of a decade. "As I've told ye, I'm hyer fer ther final settlement. You didn't finish me ther night ther Injun flung me from ther stage.

Thet red-skin war Velvet Foot, but you know that. Recollect that I only saw you once afore, an' that war arter night in a canyon; that's why I didn't know you till you shouted yer name to Velvet Foot to r'ile dim. You lied to him then, fer you told him that Floss war yer devoted wife."

"Prove that I lied, Dynamite!" said the sport with a provoking and defiant smile.

"I needn't do that—I know it!" was the answer. "She's not yer wife, an' she never will be! Whar war ther girl when you saw her last?"

"In the cabin."

"When war that?"

"Sence sundown. But why put these questions—you know where she is."

"I do not. She warn't hyer when I spelt them words on the floor with the blackened sticks."

"Not here then? When was that?"

"While you war buryin' yer two guards in the picket—the men I assaulted to save Chincapiu."

At the mention of Chincapin's name, Blade started, and his thoughts seemed to go back to his encounter with the youth in the cabin at Clear Grit Camp.

"They have met, then," he said aloud.

"Not yet, but they shall!" replied Dynamite resolutely. "I didn't take Floss away, neither did Chincapin. Thar's another person who wants her."

"Velvet Foot?"

"Yes, ther red-skin."

"Do you think he has found her?"

"I think he has."

"Then, by heavens! I will trail him to the death!"

The Sport in his rage forgot his own situation. Dynamite Dan smiled grimly.

Blade's eyes suddenly lighted up with triumph. He looked beyond his foe, and his gaze sweeping down the log-walled corridor seemed to see the men who had reached the door of the hut.

"Yer gold guards, Blade?" asked Dynamite without turning his head.

The sport's eyes said "yes," but his lips remained mute.

"Thank fortune, the cap'n's at home!" said a voice that penetrated the cavern. "I lowed all along that he war ahead ov us. Hurry up ther prisoner, boys. Hyar he is! Walk in, Chincapin—this is whar we hang up when we're at home."

What made Dynamite Dan whirl half-way round with a startling cry on his lips?

"Chincapin—the boy—hyer?" he exclaimed.

The end of the corridor nearest the entrance was already filled with men—not the miners of Clear Grit, but the merciless bravos of Cochetopa.

And Chincapin was their prisoner!

He seemed to forget that Blade, the Sport, faced him with the weapon which he used with deadly effect—he thought only of Chincapin.

All at once with the suddenness of a panther's spring, Blade the Sport took advantage of Dynamite's astonishment, and leaped at him. The attack could not be met nor withstood.

"Chincapin is here to die with you!" he hissed in Dynamite's ear, as he crushed the old miner

back, almost depriving him of his footing before he could realize the fiendishness of the attack.

Dynamite's bowie was torn from his grasp, and at the same time a wild shout came from the men in the corridor.

"Help the cap'n, some ov ye!"

Six stalwart fellows rushed into the cavern; they seemed to realize everything in a moment; they knew the enemies at once.

Blade the Sport glanced at them triumphantly as their hands separated him from Dynamite, whom others who had also rushed to the rescue held disarmed, and threatened with revolvers.

"Warn't you mistaken when you said this war your day?" he said, striding up to the miner.

"I've seen men mistaken before. This seems to be my hour instead ov yours. Whar is the other prisoner?"

The last question addressed to his men was promptly responded to.

"Hyer's ther chick, cap'n. We caught him with three others who got the benefit of our repeaters, but ther boy wouldn't run arter that. He's grit itself ef he did come from the San Juan kentry. Hyer he is, chief!"

The person thrust forward into Bowie Blade's presence drew a cry from Dynamite's lips.

It was Chincapin!

At the old trailer's exclamation the youth turned and their eyes met.

"Dynamite Dan!" cried the young man. "I might have known that you were here—"

"Thar!" and Dynamite made an effort to reach Chincapin's side, but he was held back. "You would not run when those men shot yer companions—that's why ye'r hyer."

"Run? Thar's no run in the boy!" came from the rough crowd, before Chincapin could reply. "Didn't he turn forty toes to ther stars before we teched him? He wouldn't be hyer now ef we hadn't played a cold deck on him as it war."

Chincapin's eyes flashed proudly for a moment, but softened when they fell upon Dynamite again.

The bosom of the old miner seemed to be ready to burst asunder with emotion.

His glance flew quickly from Chincapin to the gold guards who awaited their leader's orders.

"What ar' you goin' to do with ther boy?" he asked, fixing his eyes upon Blade.

A bitter laugh was the first response.

"He's yer young pard—the husband you've picked out for Floss an' I'm goin' to hang him in your presence."

These were the sport's cutting words.

A cry of mad indignation was torn from Dynamite's throat.

"By the gods! not while Dynamite's hyer!" he exclaimed. "A thousand necks shall stretch in Cochetopa, but Chincapin's—never!"

With the last word the miner's arms left his sides and clasped those nearest him right and left.

A bound, which no human power could resist, carried him to Chincapin's side.

"We stand together, Dynamite!" said the youth.

"I've got a right to die for you, boy—it's my duty!"

He hurled back the gold-guards who leaped forward to tear him from Chincapin's side.

"I'm a tiger when you smooth my back the wrong way!" broke from his lips. "I'm a thousand catamounts rolled into one when you go to touch Chincapin!"

If Dynamite was all this, his enemies did not hesitate.

One of the sport's hands went up and delivered a signal which threw every desperado of the gold hills upon the pair.

Dynamite stepped before the youth and fought them back, but he might as well have tried to stem, single-handed, the billows of a stormy sea.

"They belong to me!" shouted the sport above the din of the fierce scuffle of two with twenty. "Take them alive and I will keep my vow—that every invader of Cochetopa shall get death—not gold!"

The trailer's attempt at rescue was a failure.

Strength and lion-like courage does not always win the day.

As Montezuma had been beaten back in the stony path by those very human wolves, so were Dynamite and Chincapin overpowered by a courage more brutal than theirs."

"My men are invincible, Dynamite!" exclaimed Blade, after the victory. "A captive has never escaped me."

"You forget Floss," said Dynamite, triumphantly.

The sport's brow darkened, but he suppressed the oath that was on his lips.

"We want two ropes now, Domino," he said, madly, to a stalwart guard in his front. "I'll clinch my claims to Floss an' Cochetopa before mornin'!"

CHAPTER XIII.

FLOSS EMPTIES HER REVOLVER.

YES, the sport had overlooked Floss when he told Dynamite, in tones of triumph, that no captive had ever escaped from him.

Where was the girl?

Not far from the cavern in the side of the hill where we left most of our characters at the conclusion of the foregoing chapter, stood the fair being for whom Dynamite had hunted ten years.

We left her in the hands of Velvet Foot, the Indian who found her on the outside of the hut shortly after Dynamite had left the words, "I'm here," formed with half-burned sticks on the floor of the cave.

She was now alone—alone with the wooded hills of Cochetopa around and above her, for Velvet Foot had left her in an old mine, deserted for years, but she had made her way from its depths and stood once more beneath the brilliant stars that glittered in the heavens.

"That Indian has been hunting a long time for me," she said to herself. "He calls himself Velvet Foot, and asked me if I recollect when I lived in a tepee and had an Indian for a friend—when a white man used to come occasionally to see me. But I do not recollect the white man who came to see me according to Velvet Foot's story. The first white man I remember seeing is he whom people call Blade—the gold-hunter with the embroidered jacket and sombrero. He has taken me to many places since I

met him first. I was a girl then, and it is under his eyes that I have grown up. Now the red hunter comes, but not until a white man who calls himself Dynamite has said that he, too, wants me—that he will take me from Blade, whose life he will take for something done in the past. Where are they—the white man and Velvet Foot? The Indian said he would come back soon; but I could not remain in the mine, so I am here."

She paused abruptly, as though a footstep or voices had startled her, and she drew a revolver which she carried in the belt that girt her sylphlike waist.

Confident that her ears had not deceived her this time, Floss stepped back to the mouth of the mine which was a few feet behind her, and waited.

"Indians!" fell from her lips after she had listened a moment. "Blade said lately that the Indians whom the gold-guards drove from Cochetopa not long since would surely come back. They are here, showing that he did not miss the mark."

Floss tightened her grip on the butt of the revolver, while she gazed at the red invaders of Cochetopa, who had come back from Indian-dom thirsting for revenge.

To Floss's consternation, the entire band halted directly in front of her position.

"Where is Silver Serpent?" asked the chief.

"Silver Serpent is here!" And a young red-skin advanced from the band and confronted the red leader.

"Is Noropoco's grave here?"

Floss started.

Noropoco was the Indian whom the hoods of Cochetopa had buried alive.

"Heavens!" she gasped. "They are hunting for the lost chief."

Is it a wonder that Floss shrunk back into the depths of the deserted mine from which she had fled after Velvet Foot's departure?

She saw the flashes of flints from the spot where she paused for a moment, and then the cavernous opening was illuminated by the glare of a torch.

The red avengers were hunting for their chief.

The advancing torch, which was probably carried by this same Silver Serpent, drove her on and on, until at last she found herself almost at the end of a corridor which contained many strange niches, like cells.

The Indians were almost upon her.

Floss darted into one of the niches where she turned with her tapering finger at the trigger of the revolver.

"I will kill if they touch me!" she murmured with more than girlish determination. "I am not going to fall into the clutches of this band of Indian wolves."

On came the torch, and the girl was hoping that the entire band would pass by and leave her to fly once more unmolested toward the mouth of the mine.

Silver Serpent led the Indians past the niche that sheltered her. She breathed free once more.

"Noropoco is near," she heard the red-skin say. "In one of these holes the white viper of Cochetopa hid the great chief away and left him

to die. We must search them all. We must find Noropoco!"

The hunters seemed to disperse to search the various niches along the corridor.

"Now is my time!" said the girl. "I have not a moment to lose."

The next moment she was at the mouth of her niche, but the light of a torch dazed her eyes, and she shrank back.

She was on the threshold of discovery!

"Mebbe chief in here."

With the last words the entrance was darkened by a human figure, and Floss fell back to the end of the niche.

The place became dark when the red-skin had fully entered. He was feeling his way with his hands.

"It must come to this—I can do no more!" fell from Floss's lips.

She went forward resolutely, determined to escape or perish there.

The Indian heard her step and started.

"Ugh! Noropoco alive!" he grunted.

He retreated for the purpose of alarming his companions, but the young girl's hand at that moment touched his throat.

A moment later Floss's revolver touched his temples, a flash and a report followed, and as the red brave reeled back, the girl leaped from the niche, past the falling body and started away.

A wild yell, full of horror and vengeance, rose behind her.

She ran as she had never run before.

It was not necessary for her to glance over her shoulder to know that a score of red demons was at her heels.

"Heaven help me now!" she ejaculated. "Let me reach the trails beyond the mine, and I will escape these fiends."

Fortune seemed to favor her, for she was nearing the mouth of the cave without being recaptured.

The red-skins were not acquainted with the interior of the mine with the exception of Silver Serpent, and he knew but little about it.

Suddenly and just when she could see the shimmering stars, Floss was thrown to the floor by stepping on a loose stone. It was with difficulty that she kept the revolver in her hand.

The Indian torch revealed this unlucky accident to those who followed it.

Floss felt dazed for a moment, but the wild yells of triumph that filled the mine brought her almost instantly to her senses.

"Back!" she shouted to the red-skins, wheeling and facing them with the outstretched revolver, and the next instant she was pouring the contents of the steel chambers into their painted faces.

The girl fired rapidly and with unerring aim.

At the first shot the torch dropped from Silver Serpent's hands, and he fell back shot between his keen hawk-like eyes.

The Indians recoiled from the death-dealing revolver, and seeing her opportunity Floss turned and fled again.

This time she reached the trail beneath the stars, but she was still pursued.

A dozen Indians leaping over their slain com-

rades were hunting her for vengeance; they had quite forgotten Noropoco the buried chief.

"I do not fear them now," the girl murmured. "I am among scenes with which I am familiar, but I have still a race for life before me."

She darted down the trail with the fleetness of a fawn flying from its pursuers.

"Safe at last!" she panted more than two miles from the mouth of the mine when she had listened a few moments for her pursuers' footsteps without hearing a sound of one. "I can wait here until they have searched the mine for the lost chief. I could go back to Blade the Sport—why not? Ah! I gave Velvet Foot my word that I would meet him at the mine and he says Blade stole me years ago from a home where I was happy. If this be true, I should hate him."

"I guess that's so, girl."

Floss turned as quickly as if a rattlesnake had delivered its warning behind her.

She saw the figure of a giant so near that she recoiled with a light cry, which brought the giant forward.

"Don't make any noise," he said, so near her that she could see that he wore a dark bandage over one half of his face. "We're close to a picnic Blade's about to have ef nobody interrupts 'im. You don't know me? My name's Montezuma. I've met the wolves ov Cochetopa to-night. You'd think I hed anyhow ef you could see me by daylight. They made a sieve out ov me, but I kin shoot fer all that. You've got a revolver—good! I've got two. Ef you'll foller me, Floss, we'll spile that mountain picnic."

The girl stepped to the giant's side.

"I am with you," she said, firmly. "I can rely on my revolver. It has served me nobly once to-night."

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO NOOSES AND THREE REVOLVERS.

FLOSS and Montezuma, the well-known giant of Clear Grit Camp, had met for the first time.

Besides the bandage on his face, a bandage which was bloody, the stalwart miner showed other signs of being wounded, but the girl did not question him.

He led the way to the left of the spot where the meeting had taken place, carrying in each hand a large revolver, which was ready to take a hand in any kind of a melee.

Floss could not but regard him with devouring curiosity.

She felt that he was one of the new invaders of Cochetopa, and she wondered whether all the rest were athletes like him.

His great effort to walk steady did not escape her.

She knew that he was desperately wounded, not only in one, but in many places.

All at once she found the giant staring into her face.

"You're the girl what brought Dynamite to this kentry," he said, in a low voice. "I knowed it the minute I set eyes on ye. Have ye seen the old pard?"

"I have, but he escaped me," Floss said.

"He'll find you yet," replied Montezuma, quickly, and with a confidence that dilated the

girl's eyes. "But we can't talk about him now. We've got suthin' on our hands."

"Where?" asked Floss.

"Ye'll see in a minute."

This short space of time had hardly terminated, ere the giant stopped suddenly, and turned again to Floss with a look that commanded silence.

The twain stood together, but the giant was leaning over a stone, which had lain for years on the fringe of the trail, and appeared to be gazing upon a scene of some kind some distance below.

"It's about to commence—Blade's picnic," he said in whispers over his shoulders, to Floss. "Jes' lean over the stun an' look down thar."

When he stepped back, the young girl went forward and gazed downward.

What did she see?

About one hundred feet below their position, and in front of a rough cabin, several blazing torches lit up the scene which, once observed, could never be forgotten.

A score of men armed to the teeth and wearing white hoods which concealed their faces, stood on a little plateau between the hut and a thicket of young trees.

In their midst, erect but evidently prisoners, soon to be executed, if the two ropes dangling from a heavy beam of wood that projected from the cabin at one corner meant anything at all, stood two men.

One was past the middle age, with broad shoulders and a grizzled beard; the other was young, little more than a boy, handsome, well built, and with an eye as keen as the eagle's.

These two men stood side by side awaiting their doom with the courage of heroes who had faced death a thousand times.

It was a scene that riveted Floss's attention from the first.

Montezuma watched her with a strange interest. He saw that her eyes were fixed upon the younger of the doomed pair.

"Wal, what do ye think ov Blade's picnic?" asked Montezuma.

"They shall not die!" was the quick, resolute reply. "But who are they?"

"Dynamite an' Chincapin."

Floss started at mention of the first name.

"Ah! the man who has sought me for years!" she exclaimed.

"The same."

"The other—"

"They're pards an' hev been ever since I knowned 'em," was the interruption. "Dynamite hez been lookin' fer Blade an' he's found 'im at last. I didn't think the sport 'd git the upper hand ov the old chap, but thar's no tellin' what 'll happen when you trail a man in this kentry. Thar! the gold-guards hev taken hold ov ther ropes. You hev said thet those pards sha'n't die. Montezuma is with you on thet, Floss!"

The girl and the giant were both looking over the stone now—gazing down upon the exciting scene revealed by the flaring torches.

"I always play my games to the end, Dynamite!" said a clear voice, whose ringing tones came up to the twain. "You have followed me a long time; but it's a long lane that turns not, you know. We have never been friends.

My hand an' yours could not meet in friendship. If I did not choke you off, you would not spare me."

"Ye'r' right, Blade."

A proud smile curled the sport's lips as he continued:

"Of course you would, an' all because I once robbed an Injun tepee of its guarded tenant, a little girl called Floss."

Montezuma's hand tightened on the girl's arm at this, and the look he received told him that she had heard every syllable.

"For that little theft you swore to hunt me down, Dynamite, but I eluded you an' the Injun, Velvet Foot, who took an oath similar to yours. Where have I been? Ask the gold lands of the Sacramento Valley, the Indian trails of the Big Horn country, and the ranches along the Rio Grande. You failed to strike my trail all those years. It wa'n't my fault. But when I made my way into the Cochetopa country, you struck my trail. I came up from Santa Fe on the accursed stage which the Injun assaulted. I then knew that Velvet Foot was still my living enemy, an' I soon afterward discovered that you war my stage companion. But enough. I have spoken thus to tell you before you die that it was not your fault that you did not find me sooner. As for the youngster at your side, I told him when I pinned him to the wall of his own shanty with my bowie that he would get his foot in it if he followed me. He would not listen, but came to Cochetopa vowing vengeance against me with the men of Cl'ar Grit, an' thar he stands at yer side endin' his trail with yours at the end of a noose."

The sport stepped back as he finished, revealing his handsome figure more fully to Montezuma and the girl.

"It is his last triumph!" exclaimed Floss, whose eyes blazed while they regarded Blade.

She sprung upon the rock, and leveled a revolver at the man of Cochetopa.

"Not thet man, girl!" cried Montezuma, and his hand darted forward and closed on her arm.

"Why not, Montezuma?"

"We must leave him fer ther other hunter—ther red one."

"Velvet Foot?"

"Yes."

"No!" said the girl, attempting to disengage her arm from the giant's grasp. "An Indian's oath is not more sacred than a white girl's wrongs."

But the great bronze hand of Montezuma was not to be shaken off by a young girl's strength. He conquered.

"Ef we spile that picnic it mustn't be from hyer," he said. "We can't shoot downward with much effect, ez you may know. We must git on a level with thet party."

"But that will take time. Look! they are handling the ropes now."

"We kin git down thar. Three minutes ar' all we want."

Montezuma almost dragged the eager girl from the stone, and was hurrying her from the spot.

The giant seemed to forget his numerous wounds. His steps were no longer unsteady.

He turned and bounded off like a hound nearing his quarry.

Floss could do naught but follow, for there was not a minute to lose.

The path which they traversed sloped to the table-land in front of the hut.

It entered the thicket to the right of the cabin.

"We're hyer, an' thar's been no hangin' yet," said Montezuma, turning to the girl when they had halted for breath in the thicket. "We kin go forward now an' break up the fun. Mebbe we kin do it without a drop ov bloodshed. Do you know what the wolves ov Cochetopa did arter they charged me to-night?"

"No."

"They rolled me over ther hillside, an' shot at me ez I went down through ther bushes! Thar's whar I got all my wounds. When I got to ther foot ov ther hill, a grizzly came up an' inspected me fer five minutes. But he didn't hev any use fer a man arter them hooded skunks yonder hed settled with him, and so he left me in peace. Now fer bizness. Foller me ef you want ter, er stay back—jes' ez it suits ye."

With his last word the giant glanced at his revolvers, and stepped forward, without noticing whether the girl followed him or not.

A glare of tigerish hatred added ferocity to his bloodshot eyes.

He went straight toward the group in front of the house.

"Now, swing 'em up!" shouted Blade, as Montezuma cleared the thicket. "Floss shall live to be queen of my palace yet, Dynamite, an' the bones of the red trailer shall be picked by the vultures of Cochetopa before many days. Ropes are trumps, an' Blade holds the winning hand!"

"I'm on hand with a new deal! Drop them ropes, or die like dogs whar ye stand!"

Everybody turned toward the man who had uttered these words, and all saw him in the light of the six torches, with two outstretched revolvers of the largest pattern.

He was not alone.

A sylphlike figure stood at his side, and the flashing eyes of Floss looked over a weapon not so large as Montezuma's, but just as deadly.

Dynamite Dan could not suppress an exclamation:

"Heavens! The girl—Floss!"

He did not seem to see the stalwart figure of the giant.

Blade and his hooded followers exchanged rapid glances.

On a word, an act, the wave of a hand, more than one human life depended!

"What will ye do, men ov Cochetopa?" continued Montezuma. "I'm not goin' ter stand hyer all night. I kin hardly hold my fingers back now. I'll begin to work the machinery in my hands in erbout a minute. We want the prisoners, Dynamite an' Chincapin! Refuse us, an' by Heaven! we'll start a graveyard whar ye stand! It's not hard to tell wholl tumble first."

Montezuma's glance rested for a second on Blade's face, and then sought the astonished hoods again.

The giant held victory in his hands.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HOODS SUCCEED AGAIN.

WHAT would the sport do?

He could look over the threatening revolvers into the blood-shot eyes of the man who held them.

"Take the captives, an' be hanged!" said the sport, in a voice which told how the words had been forced from his heart. "But this does not end the matter. I give you fair warnin' of that, Montezuma. We'll try conclusions some other time."

"Soon, I hope," said Dynamite.

"We can't try them too soon for me," was the retort. "But go! my men ar' gettin' restless."

The hooded gold-guards drew back and let the two late prisoners pass to Montezuma and the girl.

Not a shot was fired, and the little party soon halted some distance from the place of rescue.

Dynamite wheeled instantly upon the girl.

"At last!—after ten years' trailing!" he exclaimed. "I would hev known her anywhar, Montezuma, though she war a child when Blade robbed the wigwam. She war a wild rose then, and she's one yet, purtier than ever, an' never to fall back into the white thief's hands. Ah! you know me, Floss! I'm Dynamite—Dan Dumbold I war them days."

The girl could hardly wait until the old trailer had paused. She seemed eager to ask a question.

"Who am I—not your child?" she exclaimed.

"No," with a quick glance at Chincapin. "I never had a girl baby to love."

"Then—"

"Never mind. Don't press the question now, Floss," was the interruption. "Thar's a home waitin' fer ye—one you'll do credit to er my name's not Dynamite. Come hyer, Montezuma."

"The big miner is not here," said Chincapin. "He slipped away just a moment ago."

"In which direction?"

"That way, sir," and the youth pointed toward a dense undergrowth.

Dynamite started forward.

"Stay hyer with Floss," he sent back over his shoulder to Chincapin, and before the youth could reply he had disappeared.

The young couple found themselves face to face for the first time.

"What is Dynamite to you?" asked the girl, who looked strangely with the revolver still clutched in her hand.

"Nothing more than a friend," was the reply.

"Are you sure of that?"

Floss's tones startled the youth, and set him to thinking for a minute, during which time he was not disturbed, although cautiously watched.

"I must answer you as I did in the first place," he said at last, lifting his eyes to the girl's. "Dynamite Dan an' I are friends—nothing more."

"The Indian must have told me wrongly, then!"

"What Indian?"

Floss uttered a low cry.

She had unconsciously spoken her thoughts aloud.

"Forgive me!" she said, blushing. "I was not aware—"

"There! let it pass," smiled Chincapin, who was by no means satisfied. "I will ask Montezuma a certain question at the first opportunity. He knows, if anybody does."

The last sentences the youth spoke to himself.

"You have asked me whom I have just called the Indian," resumed the girl. "He calls himself Velvet Foot."

"Is he in Cochetopa?"

"He is here."

Chincapin turned round as if he expected to see the sport's persistent red trailer at that moment.

"Hark!" said Floss, touching his arm. "Montezuma and Dynamite are coming back."

At that moment the sounds heard by the girl died away, as if her voice had been heard, and the approaching stopped.

"No! We are near an enemy," whispered Chincapin. "Go back toward the trail wall." And he stepped in front of Floss, with his face turned toward the copse.

There was a moment's silence, and then a voice came from among the trees:

"The youngster—riddle him, boys! The gal b'longs to ther cap'n!"

Hard upon the last word came the reports of several repeating rifles.

"My God! Blade's men!" cried Chincapin. Instantly his own weapon, a six-shooter, shot upward, but he did not touch the trigger, for he could see no foe.

"Show yourselves, wolves!" he shouted defiantly, as Floss sprung to his side and halted there.

The answer was more flashes, more mad shots.

"Quick! They come!" cried the girl. "Ah! yonder they are, your foes and mine."

Still unharmed by the balls, which had crashed through the young timber, Chincapin whirled upon the men, dashing forward with oaths and hoarse shouts.

An instant later his revolver was at work.

"By Jove! he's able to shoot yet—the young coyote is," cried a loud voice. "Finish 'im without ceremony, boys. The gal's not to be touched—she b'longs to Blade!"

"To that demon?—never!"

It was the girl who spoke last, and as she finished the sentence she fired straight at the hooded men, who at that moment burst through the bushes.

Shooting in the dark is not conducive to good marksmanship, but several men fell back, never to lift another weapon for Blade and his gold.

Chincapin was overpowered fighting bravely in defense of Floss, whose revolver was torn from her hand as she was thrusting it against a human face with her fingers at the deadly trigger, and the attack was over.

Ejaculations of rage and vengeance fell from the lips of more than one white hood, and Chincapin was borne swiftly from the spot to a huge tree not many rods away.

A rope was here produced and thrown over a limb, one end of the cord having previously been placed over his head in the shape of a noose.

"Now, up with 'im! He's one ov the chaps what came from the San Juan kentry to find a grave hyer along with ther rest. Up with him!"

Chincapin was jerked from the ground and left dangling 'twixt Heaven and earth, while the rope was wrapped about the body of the tree, so as to leave him swinging in mid-air.

"Now fer the Palace!"

Floss was eager to be taken from the terrible spot.

With a parting shot the party went forward again.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAST STRUGGLE FOR COCHETOPA.

"It war our fault, Montezuma," said one of two men on the night after the occurrence just witnessed.

They were not alone in the large subterranean chamber in which they stood.

Twenty men, some wearing bandages as if wounded, surrounded them, and all were well-armed.

These were the defiant remnant of the miners of Clear Grit.

They had found one another at various times, and in many places since the gold-guards' attack on their camp, and they were still ready to renew the fight against Blade and his desperadoes.

"I saw it war our fault that we lost Chincapin an' ther girl last night," continued Dynamite, addressing Montezuma. "You heard a noise—footsteps in the thicket an' left to reconnoiter, an' I follerred to find you. Wal, we lost the young pair—that's the hull upshot ov ther matter, but we'll get them back!"

During Dynamite's speaking Montezuma's eyes wandered beyond the men who faced him, and seemed to steal out into the night that enclosed the mouth of the cave.

Suddenly the giant tottered and fell forward before those nearest him could prevent.

"Stand back!" he cried, rising almost instantly facing those who rushed forward. "I'm not goin' to die yet. We haven't teched a nugget ov Blade the Sport's gold, so I've got no right to die. What did I say on ther whisky bar'l ther last night in Cl'ar Grit Camp?—thet I would bring ye all to Cochetopa, an' that we'd each get a bonanza! We ar' hyer, so is the mine fer each man. I'm a livin' sieve, almost, but I'm Montezuma still."

He looked like a madman as he stood in the glare of a torch, blood on his face, for the bandage had fallen off, and blood in his wild eyes.

It is no wonder that the spectators recoiled.

"To ther fight at once! What's ther use ov stayin' hyer!" he shouted. "Ther bonanza awaits each man, but he's got to fight fer it."

"Ov course, Montezuma!" said Dynamite, glancing at the men. "We're all ready fer the tussle, but—"

"Now! now! Men will foller Montezuma—cowards will stay hyer!"

The speaker, rendered almost insane by his wounds, which seemed to be sapping his wonderful powers of endurance, turned and led the way toward the mouth of the cavern.

With a wild shout the gold hunters sprung after him.

Dynamite Dan looked on for a moment, and then caught up the torch which was sticking in a crevice in the rocky wall.

"I can go where he leads. I hev foller'd him afore," he said, regarding Montezuma's tall figure for a moment. "But I don't like to foller a man what's gold-mad, that's sart'in."

At that instant Montezuma and his followers recoiled from an object which had alighted in the light of the torch.

"Injuns!" was the startling cry. "Death to them ez well as Blade's pards."

But Dynamite who had caught sight of the figure, swept forward like a whirlwind.

"Not a shot! It is Velvet Foot!" he shouted, dashing the giant's revolvers down.

"A little more an' it would hev been Dead Feet, Dynamite."

It was lucky that the sport's enemy recognized Velvet Foot when he did, for in another instant the gold-hunters would have emptied their revolvers into the red-skin's body.

Velvet Foot's greeting of Dynamite consisted of a look—nothing more.

"The gold-men of Clear Grit need to make no trail," he said. "Let them get ready. The white viper an' his hidden faces are creeping hither."

"Comin' hyer, Injun?" ejaculated Montezuma.

"They are very near."

"Good! Here we stand for Cochetopa!"

The Indian hastily said that the men of Cochetopa, more than thirty in number, were swiftly but silently approaching the cave.

"Sw'ar, men—up with yer hands!" shouted Montezuma, whirling upon his companions. "This is the night fer vengeance an' Cochetopa. Sw'ar ter possess ther promised land! Sw'ar ter clean ther gold guards out an' possess ther kentry!"

Up went every right hand.

"We sw'ar, Montezuma! This night we win the bonanza er a grave!"

Ten minutes later every man crouched among the dark shadows at the mouth of the cave, waiting for the enemy approaching from below.

With the tread of the panther, the men who had followed Blade for years, guarding with their lives the wonderful gold region in the heart of Colorado, crept along the hill trail which would surely carry them to the last battle-ground many of them would ever see.

Their forms were darker than the shadows they glided through, and their hands clutched revolvers and repeating rifles, which had served them well before.

The desperate encounter near at hand had to take place.

The Cochetopa Hills could not be inhabited at the same time, by two bands of men like those of Clear Grit and Blade's followers.

They were compelled to fight a battle to the death for self-protection.

Velvet Foot, the sport's hunter, had marked them well.

He knew where to find the gathered remnant of the invaders, and to them he had gone with the startling news of the enemy's advance.

He did not stop to inquire after Floss, who had strangely eluded him after leaving her in the depths of the old mine, but followed the men of Clear Grit to the battle-field of their own choosing.

"Thar they come—like snakes creepin' up ther trail!" suddenly whispered Montezuma, whose fingers twitched nervously at the deadly triggers they touched. "Now, pards, do yer duty fer Cochetopa. Remember that we've burned ther old camp behind us—that we die hyer before we go back!"

The response told Montezuma that the men at his back would do or die.

The approach of the gold guards could now be heard.

"Ready!" whispered the giant, who by common consent commanded the men of Clear Grit. "Let yer first fire more than stagger their line—let it turn ther faces ov half ther band up to ther stars. Dynamite?"

"I'm hyer."

"Good! You can't pick Blade the Sport out from ther men down yonder. I'm sorry fer that."

Dynamite Dan's lips met, but no word escaped them.

Several minutes later Montezuma's voice went through the waiting crowd again.

"Now, pards, shoot fer ther bonanza?" he said.

At the same time his great arms thrust his weapons forward.

All at once a flash of flame revealed the bronze faces of the gold-hunters, and a deadly volley drew loud cries from the dark figures creeping over the trail below.

Again and again Montezuma and his followers fired straight into the advancing ranks.

The effect was terrible.

Stunned for a moment, the gold guards rallied, and instead of recoiling from the fearful fire that steadily rained death into their faces, they went forward with the impetuosity of tigers, firing as they went.

"Meet 'em more'n half way!" exclaimed the giant. "Thar's nothing like a hand-to-hand fight for a big stake like Cochetopa!" and Montezuma led his men down the trail.

A moment after the two bands met.

Hand to hand, knife to knife and revolver to revolver, the fight for extermination went on.

"Come, white brother, he is not here!" said a voice at Dynamite's elbow in the midst of the deadly conflict.

The old man saw Velvet Foot at his side.

"Where is he then?" he asked.

"Will Dynamite follow Velvet Foot?"

"Yes."

Pulled aside by the Indian, Dynamite soon found himself beyond the tigerish men who were fighting for the possession of Cochetopa.

"Blade was here when fight begin, but him no here now," said Velvet Foot, as the twain hurried away. "Ah! we will find him, brother."

"An' you will slay him?" asked Dynamite, eagerly.

"If Dynamite no get ahead of him."

The old miner's eyes glittered, but he made no reply.

Velvet Foot led the way over the trail which

had been traversed within the last few minutes by the sport.

"We are here, brother," said the Indian, halting suddenly.

Dynamite looked ahead.

The cabin in front of the sport's cave was before him.

"Ther lion's den!" he exclaimed, darting forward, escaping Velvet Foot's hand which sought to detain him.

The next second he had crossed the threshold, and stood once more in the log-walled corridor.

"I am hyer, Blade," he cried, in thunderous tones. "Let thar be no mistake this time! Hyer let Dynamite's life-trail end," fell from his lips, as he went forward eager to grapple for the last time with his foe.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LIFE-HUNT ENDED.

THE two men met on the lighted threshold of the gold guards' rendezvous.

Velvet Foot saw them come together.

"Ha! Dynamite is at the end of his life-hunt!" ejaculated the red-skin.

In another instant an exclamation of horror parted Velvet Foot's lips.

He had seen Dynamite reel from the mountain sport, and a figure was bounding toward him.

All at once Blade, the Sport disappeared as if the wall of the corridor had opened and received him.

"The Mountain Rose!" cried the Indian.

A tremendous bound carried him to the spot where the sport had vanished.

"Follow him not—he belongs to Dynamite!" said a voice as a hand closed on the red-skin's naked arm.

"Dynamite's boy!" was the reply, for Velvet Foot had recognized Chincapin in the youth who stood at his side.

The Indian did not enter at the door that was before him, but turned toward the figure approaching from the cavern.

It was Dynamite, wounded as both the youth and the Indian saw.

A wild, mad light flashed up in his eyes.

"He's dyin' in thar!" said the old miner, pointing to the door, and a moment later he was gone.

Velvet Foot and Chincapin held back.

They would not interfere in the last struggle of the two foes.

"He's gone, by Jove!" exclaimed a voice and Dynamite reappeared at the door.

"Follow Velvet Foot, then!" cried the Indian.

The three rushed from the cabin down the sloping hill, the Indian in the advance.

A short distance from the hut they came suddenly upon a human figure which lay across the path.

Dynamite stooped, but almost instantly drew back.

"Ther long hunt hez ended!" he said, looking up at his companions. "Cochetopa belongs to ther men ov Cl'ar Grit!"

It was true.

Blade, the Sport was dead.

Nevermore would be marshal his gold guards, nor touch one of the nuggets that glittered among the Cochetopa Hills.

"Now, back to ther battle-ground!" continued Dynamite. "My wound—it's nothin'—a scratch—though it staggered me fer a moment. Chincapin, whar is Floss?"

The youth's eyes lighted up with satisfaction.

"She is safe where I left her an hour ago, when I found her shut up here and rescued her. Last night I had a rope around my neck, for the gold guards captured us shortly after you and Montezuma left us. I was fairly hung, and if the leader of the hangin' party had not cut the rope with one of the bullets he afterward fired at me, I might still be there, food for the vultures of Cochetopa."

"A close shave, Chincapin!" exclaimed Dynamite. "But we're at the end ov ther trail now."

A few minutes later the trio reached the battle-ground.

The desperate mountain fight, the death-struggle for Cochetopa, had been fought and won, and Montezuma was found standing in the midst of a little group of victors.

"We've won ther game!" the giant exclaimed. "We'll hev ter take two bonanzas apiece." And the rough smiled as he glanced at his few supporters. "By Jove, Dynamite! we'll build a city—no flash town, but a real city—whar we burned Cl'ar Grit. This is what I call startin' a wholesale grave-yard, but our pards died like men. They war an honor to ther old camp."

Before the night had advanced far Floss stood in the presence of the small band of victors and learned from Dynamite's lips all he knew about her life.

He assured her that a home awaited her far beyond the gold hills of Cochetopa, and told her that she should not go thither alone.

What became of Montezuma and his comrades?

They lived and mined among the hills they had won, for the giant recovered from his wounds, living to become one of the gold kings of Colorado, where he still owns an interest in some of the "big bonanzas" for which he fought.

Dynamite Dan took Floss to the home from which Blade had taken her years before.

Chincapin, who as Montezuma has suspected, turned out to be the old miner's own son, accompanied the party, and in time a quiet marriage united the two young people for the journey of life.

Velvet Foot went back to the tribe he still owned, notwithstanding his long absence—went back to other trails and quieter scenes, for Floss had been wrested from the man of Cochetopa, and he could hunt Blade no longer.

Mardo, the traitor—the only one among the gold guards—was hunted down by his leader, so that he did not fall in the last fight for the gold acres.

Clear Grit had never been rebuilt, for the men who once inhabited it are satisfied where they are.

Dynamite Dan remains near Floss.

"She war worth huntin' fer, fer Chincapin got a wife by it all," he says to visitors, when he holds up for their inspection the laughing babe that has come to bless Floss's home.

The Indians never found their lost chief.

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